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BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

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# BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

A Novel

BY

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AUTHOR OF

'FOLLY MORRISON,' 'HONEST DAVIE,' 'FETTERED FOR LIFE,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

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# BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

## CHAPTER I.

THE Lecture Hall and Literary Institute, Tottenham—a long, rectangular room, lit with six gas-jets on hanging, L-shaped fittings ; the drab walls decorated with half a dozen maps, the coloured representation in section of a very early steam-engine, an ethnological chart, and other instructive works of art. At one end a small stage, opening 14 feet  $\times$  8 feet, flanked by red curtains, and furnished with six footlights and a drop-scene, showing Athens, the worse for many falls ; a grand piano below the proscenium by way of

orchestra. The body of the hall rayed in parallel lines with red-cushioned rout-seats, on which are closely pressed the relations and friends of pupils connected with Mrs. Vicary Shepherd's High School and Academy for the daughters of gentlemen. An overflow of bashful youths lines the walls right and left. Three very warm looking gentlemen, each with a packet of programmes in his hand and a white favour in his buttonhole, are endeavouring, with smiling assiduity, to find places for a gang of late comers ; while two more, similarly distinguished, are striving at the entrance to make an honest working-man, slightly the worse for liquor, understand that he cannot possibly be admitted without a ticket : these are the professors, who 'have kindly volunteered their services as stewards on this occasion.'

There is a general inspection of pink programmes, and a buzzing is heard. Even the

professors speak in hushed tones, for the general effect of the hall, despite the stage, is that of a Methodist chapel. A lady explains to a gentleman—who seems, by some accident, to have come there without knowing why—what is going on :

‘ It’s a High School, you know. Mrs. Vicary Shepherd—I’m sorry to see that she’s not here ; she is indisposed, I’m told—I hope it’s nothing contagious—is a lady of the most advanced modern views, and this entertainment has been got up to demonstrate the advantage of the elocution and deportment class.’

‘ Oh, I see.’

‘ She wrote to the great tragedian—what is his name?—on the subject. Here is his reply on the back of the programme. It was he who suggested what should be acted.’

‘ You don’t say so ? And what is the play he recommends ?’

‘ *She Stoops to Conquer.* My little Milly

takes the part of Diggory. She's only twelve, you know. Mrs. Vicary Shepherd assured me that, if she had only been a year or two older, she should have asked me to let her play Hardcastle.'

' Ah, indeed ! Then all the performers are —eh—young ladies ?'

' Oh, of course ; and, naturally, Mrs. Vicary Shepherd has carefully revised the play for the use of her pupils. Ah ! that is Miss Tinkleton, the music mistress. It's going to begin now.'

Miss Tinkleton plays an elaborate sonata of Schumann's—brilliant, but rather long ; not long enough, however, for the completion of arrangements behind the curtain. An awkward pause, in which the hurrying of feet, some giggling, and a confusion of whispering tongues are heard coming from the other side of Athens. A voice from the same remote part asks, ' Are you ready now, young

ladies?' to which a general reply of 'No, no ! not yet, not yet !' in accents of terror, creates a titter amongst the audience.

Miss Tinkleton, with admirable presence of mind, attacks another sonata ; but before she gets to the foot of the page, a bell rings, and the curtain rises in three spasmodic jerks. Applause from the parents and friends of the young ladies who are discovered in the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Hardcastle, facing each other, and in doubt whether they ought to begin before Miss Tinkleton has gone through her sonata.

Miss Tinkleton stops in the middle of a bar with confusion.

The play proceeds, the rigid Mr. Hardcastle and the rigid Mrs. Hardcastle exchanging their *quid pro quos* with the regular intonation of a well-learnt lesson, and the audience already assuming an air of calm repose and resignation, when a vociferous shouting beyond the red

curtain, followed by the brisk entrance of Tony Lumpkin on the scene, fairly galvanizes the audience into life. The entrance is clearly unrehearsed, for Mrs. Hardcastle incontinently forgets her part. What does that matter? Everyone is occupied with Tony, and he has the wit to turn the silence to effect. There he stands, a strapping, black-eyed young fellow with a red wig, looking audaciously at the audience as he cracks his riding-whip and whistles through a long row of white teeth.

Suddenly, as if recollecting an engagement, he says 'I'm off!' and crosses the stage with an unseen wink to Mrs. Hardcastle, and a quickly-whispered line that she is to take up. As he goes off battling stoutly with Mrs. Hardcastle at the end of the scene, everyone in the audience consults the programme, and (in whispered exclamation) 'Surely that cannot be Miss Vanessa Grahame!' is on every lip.

But it is, though—Nessa herself, who,

taking advantage of Mrs. Vicary Shepherd's absence, has determined to play the part as she conceives Goldsmith intended it to be played, and, in defiance of Mrs. Vicary Shepherd's express injunction that she should not disfigure herself, has painted her pretty face—and especially her dainty nose—with ochre and rouge, and hidden her pretty, waving chestnut hair under the red wig sent down with the costumes from Bow Street. What is more, she has got hold of an unabridged copy of the play, and is determined to say every word of it just as it was written.

The second scene is set, and Tony is there found at the head of a table with a long churchwarden pipe in his mouth. It is a real pipe, and real tobacco that Miss Grahame smokes, too, puffing out the smoke in a cloud, and never choking once—though she was giddy and sick enough after it when she went off at the end.

And here, to the terror of Miss Tinkleton at the piano, she introduced the second verse in the song of the ‘Three Jolly Pigeons,’ which Mrs. Vicary Shepherd had cut out without a moment’s hesitation, and also restored the vulgar word ‘jorum’ in the third verse, which had been changed to ‘goblet’ by the careful lady. Moreover, she introduced a step-dance in the final chorus of ‘Torroddle, torroddle, torrol,’ as if unable to contain the exuberance of her spirits. But that was not the worst. There is that dreadful part about Bet Bouncer, and here she slapped her leg and winked roguishly at the Rev. Mr. Wholeforth, whom she seemed specially to single out for that purpose ; and when it came to describing the road to Quagmire Marsh, she put a particular emphasis on the words, ‘A d—d long, dark, boggy, dirty, dangerous way,’ as if ‘very dark,’ etc., as Mrs. Vicary Shepherd had written it, was not good enough.

The act is finished, and Athens is once more in view. There is commotion in the auditorium. The ladies are shocked and alarmed. They cannot understand how Mrs. Vicary Shepherd could allow such a performance to be given. Deportment and elocution were all very well in their way, and Oliver Goldsmith was, undoubtedly, a very excellent writer, but, really, such language! And Miss Grahame, a young lady who, in a few years, would have a position in society, with three thousand a year—however could she so forget herself! Little Milly's mamma is quite sure that *her* daughter would not have played the part in that dreadful manner. It is a most serious thing to have such a person in a school where her example, though, of course, contemned, might possibly influence her fellow-pupils.

Paterfamilias listens with attentive gravity to the severe remarks of Materfamilias, but

on the whole seems less displeased with the performance, and indeed ventures a few excuses ; but the young gentlemen along the walls do not conceal their delight. They have already got the worst lines by heart, and there is chuckling all along the line. The professors withdraw into the entrance-lobby to conceal their feelings. Here they are joined by Miss Tinkleton, with tears in her eyes.

She has tried in vain to get behind the scenes by the one door, which is locked. No one would answer her knock. She feels that she will be held responsible for the behaviour of Miss Grahame, which will certainly ruin Mrs. Vicary Shepherd's reputation.

What is to be done ? The professors really do not know ; but, as it is impossible to stop the performance, it is sapiently suggested that the wisest course is to let it go on. Miss Tinkleton returns to the piano, and strenu-

ously endeavours to restore the credit of the High School by the accurate rendering of another sonata. However, the worst is past, and Nessa inflicts no fresh shock upon the sensibilities of her audience. Audacious she is, but not indelicate ; certain expressions in the original she finds unspeakable, and adroitly avoids them ; but she abates nothing of her boisterous *abandon*, and throughout the play sustains admirably the loud, boorish part of Tony. The audience sits out the performance with something more than patience ; the dash of impropriety in Miss Grahame's acting gives matter to think about and talk about when it is over ; and the majority go away very well content. But there are some who never will forgive Nessa ; these are the mammas of those young ladies whose light on the stage has been completely outshone by her.

They hear no name mentioned but that of Miss Grahame ; and the fact that she is a born

actress, and certainly saved the entertainment from being insufferably tedious, is dwelt upon in tones intended for their ears, and with malicious emphasis, by those other mammas who had desired that their daughters might not take part in the play. There is not a word said about the youthful Milly in the part of Diggory, and her mamma, taking the little darling home in a fury, and chiding her on the way for not speaking out so that she might be heard, sits down the moment she gets in to write a note informing Mrs. Vicary Shepherd that she cannot permit her daughter to commence another term if Miss Vanessa Grahame remains in her establishment.

Meanwhile, a couple of young gentlemen who have been madly in love with Nessa for the past two years, and three or four others who have seen her to-night for the first time, and have not that excuse, loiter outside the hall to see her pass to the omnibus that is

waiting to take her and the other boarders back to the school at West Green. She comes down after the small fry, with her arm linked in Miss Tinkleton's.

The full moon is right overhead ; its light glistens on her white teeth and sparkles in her dark eyes as she laughs. She is clearly trying to make the poor governess forget her trouble, and indeed succeeds in raising a faint smile on her lugubrious countenance. But though she is laughing and full of fun, Nessa is neither hoydenish nor vulgar.

Those who have not seen her before to-night can hardly believe that it was she who played Tony. They expected to find her a red-faced, romping, heavy-sided tomboy ; they see a pale-faced young lady, dressed with striking elegance, whose every movement is graceful. But there is no mistaking those big, fearless eyes, and that capital set of white teeth.

## CHAPTER II.

MRS. VICARY SHEPHERD accepted only a limited number of pupils as boarders—just as many, in fact, as could be stowed away on the second floor of Eagle House.

Among the many duties of a meek-spirited resident governess, Miss Tinkleton had each night to see the young ladies in bed before retiring to her own. She had visited five of the rooms and extinguished the light in them, when she came to the last in the corridor. That was Nessa's. Miss Tinkleton passed it with a slight cough and went downstairs, Nessa having long ago emancipated herself from a rule that was only to be suffered by children. Five minutes later, the doors up

the passage began to creak, and heads were cautiously thrust out ; then the white-robed young ladies, seeing the course clear, crept out, treading on their soft bare toes, clasping the wraps thrown over their shoulders with crossed hands on their bosoms, and made their way noiselessly towards the end room on a visit to their heroine, Nessa. With infinite precaution, one turned the handle, while the rest clustered together for common support, and did their best to keep from tittering.

But they ceased to giggle altogether when the door was opened, for there before them was the most unexpected spectacle to be found in this world of surprises. Nessa, who had never before been known to cry, was seated on her bed, with a handkerchief up to her eyes, and her bosom heaving with stifled sobs. Her hat and jacket lay on a chair ; but she had not begun to undress. Two trunks were open, and her room, never too

tidy, was littered with things taken from the open drawers and put down anywhere.

‘I can’t help it,’ she said, brushing the tears away impatiently, her breast heaving with a long, fluttering sigh; ‘and now it’s all over, I wish I hadn’t done it. I like Mrs. Vic and old Tinkleton. Oh, I love you all, and there’s no one else in the world I care anything at all for, or anyone who cares for me. I’m glad you have come. I’ve been trying to think what each of you would like best for a keepsake. Now you shall choose for yourselves. I know you like that pearl set, Dolly.’

She rose in her impulsive way to get the trinkets, but Dolly restrained her, and, clinging to her arm, made her sit down again.

‘You’re not going away, dear?’ she said.

‘Oh no!’ murmured the others, echoing her tone of remonstrance.

‘Yes, I am,’ said Nessa; ‘that’s why I’m

such a goose. I can't bear to think of saying good-bye, it has been such a jolly term, hasn't it ?'

' Do you think Mrs. Vic will be so very angry ?'

' Of course she will. Tinkleton says I've ruined the reputation of the school.'

' Oh, but you can make some excuse.'

' I never did in my life,' Nessa said, bristling up. ' I will tell her I am very sorry—and so I am ; but that isn't making an excuse.'

' Oh, she won't let you go away !'

' She cannot prevent my going, and she won't try to. I'm not a girl now ; I'm a woman, and it's time I left school. I know all the professors can tell me ; or at any rate all I choose to learn ; and I'm unmanageable. How is Mrs. Vic to punish me when I do wrong ? She can't put me in a corner, or send me to bed. And I always am doing wrong.'

The voices mingled in unanimous dissent.

‘Mrs. Vic says I am. She tells me I encourage those horrid little wretches who stare at me in church, and dog us about, and throw letters into the garden ; and those professors are quite as bad—if she only knew it : worse. I hate them. It’s an insult to make love in that cowardly way. I think all men are mean and horrid, don’t you, Dolly ?’

‘Nearly all,’ Dolly admitted with reluctance.  
‘Of course, papa is nice, and so are brothers.’

‘And uncles,’ suggested another.

‘And some cousins,’ hinted a third.

‘Oh, they don’t count,’ said Nessa. ‘I cannot remember my papa, and I don’t know that I have one relative in all the world.’

‘Not one ?’

‘No. A step-father is not a relative, and,’ she added, bending her pretty brows, ‘I’m glad of it, because I hate him with all my heart.’

‘Oh, Nessa !’

‘I know he is a coward, and I believe he is as wicked a man as ever lived. Ah, if you only knew !’

‘Couldn’t you tell us, dear ?’

‘Well, papa was a soldier—a general, you know—and he was killed in battle when I was quite a tiny little thing ; and mamma was very young and very pretty and very rich, because papa left her everything. And so when I was about six years old she married again ; and I believe Mr. Redmond only married her for her fortune, and really did not love her at all. I know she was unhappy ; for whenever she came to see me at school, she cried over me as she held me in her arms. That made me cry too, and I used to ask her to take me home with her, so that we might live always together, but all she could answer between her kisses was, “One of these days, love—one of these days.” I remember that quite

well. Though I was such a little thing, I used to think about her, and cry in the night, seeing her in imagination : always unhappy, always in tears, as I saw her when she came to me. She did not live two years after her second marriage ; my step-father broke her heart.'

'Oh, you don't know, dear !'

'Yes, I do. I'm sure of it. I have seen Mr. Redmond, and he looks like a man who would break a woman's heart.'

'Is he very ugly ?'

'Oh no ! I dare say you would think him handsome. He is a fine tall man, dark, with a black moustache ; but oh, he has those long, sleepy, treacherous eyes, and those lines down here by the mouth, don't you know, that people get who are always trying to conceal a wicked thought with a smile.'

'Oh, I hate those people who are always smiling ! They get a shiny look on their faces, don't they ? Go on, dear.'

‘I have only seen him four or five times, when I have been removed from one school to another ; but that is often enough for me, and for him too. He knows what I think of him, and hates me ; and fears me too, I’m certain. That is why he has kept me all this time at school—why, he would keep me here until he has no longer any legal control over me. He thinks he is safe while I am here—that in this artificial life I can learn nothing about the real world. But he is mistaken, as he shall find. Wait a moment.’

Nessa went to one of the boxes, and returned with an imposing document tied with pink tape.

‘Look at this,’ she said. The girls gathered closely round her, and looked at the blue foolscap in breathless awe. ‘This is a copy of mamma’s will. I sent to London for it. It’s very short. See, mamma leaves all her

estate, "real and personal," to me, her only child, Vanessa Grahame. You see, she says nothing about anyone else ; but here,' turning the page with evident satisfaction in the crackle it made, ' here is the codicil.

' Mamma has evidently been told that she must provide a guardian for me during my minority, and make some disposition of her property in case I should die before coming of age. And here she makes James Redmond my sole guardian, with power to draw eight hundred pounds a year from the invested capital, to provide for my education and personal requirements. " And further, in the event of the said Vanessa Grahame dying before the age of twenty-one"—I'm only eighteen now, you know—all the property goes to that horrid step-father, " the aforesaid James Redmond." Now, what do you think of that ?

' Your poor mamma could not have loved

him, or she would have left him some money, wouldn't she, dear ?' said Dolly.

' Of course she would ; but how is it that, leaving nothing to him in the will, she leaves me to his tender mercies in the codicil ? Can you explain that, any of you ?'

None of them could.

' I can explain it,' said Nessa, raising her voice in excitement above the low whispering tone in which it had previously been pitched ; ' this codicil is a forgery !'

' Oh, Nessa !'

' It is, and it's just the sort of forgery a cunning coward would make. He had not the courage to forge a will making the whole estate his ; but he had just enough to substitute his own name for one that mamma had written, and so get a nice little income for ever so many years out of the money for my schooling and clothes. He could do that without raising suspicion. What have I cost ?'

Not two hundred a year ; that puts him in possession of six hundred pounds, besides the use of my house, Grahame Towers.'

The girls were lost in admiration of the heiress and her wonderful romance. It was quite like a story, and the part of heroine became her so well, with her pale face, her dark, fearless eyes, the soft hair flowing loosely over her well-shaped head, her beautiful young figure, and noble carriage ! Their young eyes were not learned enough to see her weakness and vanity, or the faults which are inseparable from every character. She was not unconscious of their admiration or her own importance.

‘ When I received this,’ said she, folding up the paper with unction, ‘ I wrote to Mr. Redmond, saying that I desired to leave school, and asking what arrangement it would be convenient to him to make for my accommodation during the three years that I was

still nominally to be under his authority—for I am eighteen, you know. This is his reply.'

She drew a letter from her pocket with the same impressive gravity, and opening it, read :

“ MY DEAR NESSA,”—(What right has he to call me his dear Nessa?) “ As your legally - constituted guardian” (hum !) “ I have not only a nominal but actual authority to control your movements, and while that authority is mine, I intend to keep you at Eagle House or some similar establishment. Yours, etc., etc.,

“ JAMES REDMOND.”

The letter is dated from my own house, Grahame Towers. It came this morning, just before we were going to the rehearsal. You can imagine my indignation !

‘ You did seem rather worried, dear.’

‘ Oh, I was ! To begin with, I didn’t like

the part I had to play, as you know. As Mrs. Vic had written it out it was simply ridiculous. Now when the dresser told me how she had seen it played, I saw what a capital part it might be made ; and when I thought of this letter, I resolved to play it in that way. So I sent to the station for a copy of Goldsmith, and studied it with the dresser, who promised to make me up exactly like the actor she had seen. Ha, ha ! thought I, we will see if you are going to keep me at Eagle House, or some similar establishment, Mr. James Redmond. If I am expelled from one school, it's pretty certain that another won't take me when they hear what they are exposing themselves to !'

‘ But isn't it rather dreadful to be expelled, Nessa ? ’

‘ I shall not be expelled. I shall resign,’ said Nessa loftily. ‘ I have not studied the political history of the British constitution

for nothing,' she added, with a flash of humour in her eyes.

‘When are you going to resign, dear?’

‘The very first thing to-morrow morning. I made Tinkleton promise she would say nothing about the performance to Mrs. Vic to-night, in order that I myself might tell her in the morning. You may be sure she was glad to get out of it. There’s another reason why I prefer to resign. If I were expelled, Mrs. Vic would get nothing out of Mr. Redmond ; but if I resign, he must send her the payment for a term, and that will help to compensate the poor old soul for the injury I have done the school.’

‘And where shall you go when you leave here?’

‘To Grahame Towers, of course.’

‘But aren’t you afraid, Nessa?’

‘Afraid of what?—that coward? Not I. If I were a man, I’d be a soldier, like my

father. There's nothing I should like better than a good fight with that villain, Redmond.'

'But are you sure he's a coward, dear?' asked one of the girls naïvely.

'I am certain that he is. I am anxious for to-morrow to come; but oh!' she added, with a sudden drop in her voice as the tears sprang into her eyes, 'I shall never have the heart to say good-bye to you, dears.'

There were hugging and kissing all round, and then Nessa, bursting away, said :

'Come, let us get it over now. There, take these, Dolly; and now, little witch,' she added, turning to another friend, 'you're next. Choose what you would like.'

But the 'little witch,' sitting on the bed with her face buried in her hands, shook her head and whimpered. She was a strangely small girl for her age, with long thin fingers,

a dark complexion, and black hair, long and sleek as an Indian's. Her ways were odd and seclusive. Sometimes the girls found her seated in the dark, huddled up with her chin resting on her knees, and her weird, vacant eyes half closed, as if her spirit was wandering in some other world. She could interpret dreams, and make sense out of the greatest rubbish. She was an authority on all that concerned signs and tokens and palmistry, and had worn a smuggled pack of cards limp in telling the girls' fortunes. Her title was not unmerited.

The girls gathered about her, prepared for some new sensation in the romance of this night. Nessa alone seemed to be unawed.

‘What’s the matter, you little goose? Is there anything dreadful in giving away presents?’

‘Don’t, don’t!’ pleaded the little witch,

starting up out of the bed. ‘It’s like Naomi, my sister. When she was going to die she made us take things.’

‘But I’m not going to die. Look at me—do I look like it?’

‘You don’t know all,’ said the girl, shivering, and whispering so low that her words were scarcely audible. ‘Not all that I know. I would not tell you while it might do you harm to know, but I must now that it may save you. Oh, you must not go!’ She raised herself suddenly, and threw her arms about Nessa’s neck: ‘You, so beautiful and kind,’ she added, nestling herself in Nessa’s ready embrace.

‘Why, dear, why?’ whispered Nessa coaxingly.

‘You are in danger. Your life is not safe. There is going to be a great change, and there is peril in your path. I have seen it whenever I have looked—in the cards, in

your hand. Your line of life is broken in the nineteenth year.'

Nessa was the only one of all the little group who was not terrified into silence by the 'little witch's' prophecy.

'Oh, come, this is too bad, after promising me last week that I should have riches and long life,' she murmured playfully, as she smoothed her cheek upon the girl's sleek hair. 'The two things can't be true, you know, and of the two I would prefer to believe your first promise.'

'They are both true,' said the girl with feverish eagerness; 'you will be happy if you live; but there are three years of terrible danger before you. It was that I dared not tell you. Oh, do, do stay with us till the peril is past!'

Nessa herself stood now in silence, subdued into grave perplexity by the earnestness of her little friend.

But suddenly a ray of intelligence gleamed in her face, and unclasping the girl's clinging arms from her neck, she put her away, holding her at arm's length.

' You little trickster ! ' she exclaimed with mock disdain ; ' I have found you out. I see through your conjuring. You have been thinking about that clause in the codicil that puts Mr. Redmond in possession of my fortune if I die before twenty-one, and it struck you that he might murder me for my money, if he got me under his hand in Grahame Towers. I forgive you, dear,' she added, taking the child back to her bosom, and kissing her, ' for your sweet love of me ; but, oh ! you are awfully mistaken if you think that fear will keep me from getting into difficulties.'

## CHAPTER III.

By five o'clock the next evening Nessa was at Knaresboro', in Yorkshire.

‘Is it far to Grahame Towers?’ she asked of the man who took her ticket.

‘A matter of four or five miles before you get to the park, and then there's best part of a mile to the house. Take a fly, miss?’

‘Yes; fetch my luggage, please. There are two tin boxes with my name on them—“Grahame.”’

She gave the porter a shilling, and, looking in the porte-monnaie at her slender resources as the fly started on its journey, she said to herself:

‘If I find no one there, whatever shall I do?’

She had taken irrevocable steps, and set herself bravely to meet the consequences ; but her courage had been sorely tried by the love of those she was leaving behind for ever. Even Mrs. Vic, at the last moment, had broken down, and, forgiving, had, with tears in her eyes, begged her to stay on. As for Tinkleton and the girls, the way they took on at parting was quite dreadful to remember.

In addition to these memories, reaction after the excitement of last night made the girl’s heart very heavy indeed.

Her spirits revived, however, when the driver, turning round as they reached the crest of a hill, pointed with his whip to a massive building rising boldly out of the dark green oaks on a distant hill, and told her it was Grahame Towers. It was something to

feel that a place of such imposing grandeur, with all those green woods about it, was hers. The pride in her heart was stirred again when she caught sight of the magnificent avenue guarded by rampant panthers flanking the great gates at the entrance. It was noble!—and, thank goodness, the gates were open.

Half-way up the great drive they met a wain charged with the trunk of an enormous oak.

‘Cutting my timber!’ Nessa said to herself, with indignation.

A little further on the driver pulled up. A gentleman in shooting costume stood with a gun under his arm in the way.

It was clear to see, by his commanding presence, that he was master there.

As the fly stopped, he came to the side, and, seeing a lady, raised his hat.

It was three years since they had last met, and for the moment he failed to recognise

Nessa. Three years make a great difference in the appearance of a girl at that time of life ; they make little in a man of middle age.

Nessa knew him at once, though his black whiskers, which were formerly trimmed to a point, were now shaved away—she knew him by those long, sleepy eyes, and that odious smile.

She bowed with severe formality.

In that moment he perceived that the haughty young lady before him was the disagreeable child he had seen last in a short dress.

‘ Nessa !’ he exclaimed, the amiability going suddenly from his face, and leaving no trace save the two lines from the wings of his nostrils, ‘ why have you come here ?’

‘ Because it is my home, and I intend to stay here for the present.’

‘ You will do nothing of the kind. I told

you that it was my wish you should stay in the school where I placed you.'

'As you see, I have not stayed there.'

'Then you will be good enough to return at once.'

'Quite out of the question ; I have rendered that impossible.'

'How ?'

'This is hardly a suitable place for discussing our affairs, Mr. Redmond,' Nessa responded, with a significant glance at the driver.

'Discussing our affairs, indeed ! The discussion begins and ends here.'

'As you will,' said Nessa, with a shrug of her shoulders and a particularly provoking air of calm resignation.

'I insist upon your returning to your school at once.'

'It is no good insisting unless you can compel me to go ; and you cannot do that.'

'At least, I can prevent you from staying

here, and I will,' cried the man, livid with anger. 'Turn round,' he added, addressing the driver impatiently.

The driver turned about with a grin on his broad face, and said :

'Where am I to take you now, miss ?'

'To the nearest magistrate.'

'Why, that's Sir Thomas Bullen, at the Chase.'

'Then drive to the Chase.' Then, turning slightly towards Redmond, she added, 'If I have no right to set foot in my own house, you certainly have none.'

'You think the magistrate has the power to settle a legal question of that kind ?' Redmond said with an assumption of contempt that failed to check his anxiety, keeping pace with the fly as the driver turned the horse's head.

'No; but he may tell me what steps to take to prevent you from cutting the timber

on my estate,' said Nessa, beginning to lose control of her temper; 'and he may tell me,' she continued, with rising anger, 'how I may learn whether the eight hundred a year allowed for my maintenance has been properly applied.'

The blow stunned Redmond. He could say nothing. His narrow, unsteady eyes betrayed the fear and hatred in his heart.

'Who-oah!' cried the driver, reining in his horse, as a light phaeton came sharply round the bend in the drive.

'Curse it!' muttered Redmond furiously, as he caught sight of the phaeton and the lady who drove it. The next moment, with abject entreaty in his face, he turned to Nessa and said hurriedly :

'For Heaven's sake, go away! There's a hotel in Knaresboro'. I'll meet you there this evening, and agree to anything you like to propose.' Then, with an oath for the stolid

man on the box, 'Drive on. What are you waiting for?'

The driver turned phlegmatically to Nessa for instructions. He was getting interested in the imbroglio, and was in no hurry. Nessa was the last person in the world to be moved by a bribe, and the bare idea of quitting the park as if she had no right to be there was a sufficient incentive to stay there. Added to this, the lady in the phaeton so managed her spirited cob with rein and whip as to make it doubtful which side of the road she intended to keep. She wished to know something more about this fly and the young lady, who, even at a distance, was strikingly pretty in her close-fitting jacket and neat hat. As she at length pulled up almost within hand's-reach of Nessa she bowed, and looked to Redmond for an explanation.

There was no help for it. Redmond, with a sufficiently bad grace, introduced the two ladies.

‘Miss Grahame, my—eh—step-daughter ; Mrs. Redmond, my wife.’

Mrs. Redmond smiled very sweetly, and bowed again. She was a very showy woman —tall and comely, with a heavy plait of shining yellow hair, dark eyebrows and lashes, and the most lovely pink-and-white complexion. Her white nose was a little too short, perhaps, and her upper lip a little too long ; but her mouth was as small, and her eyes as large and divinely blue, as the conventional angel’s. At a distance Nessa thought she could not be more than five or six-and-twenty, but, on closer examination, she suspected herself in error. A little crease in the eyelid, a little pleat under the eye, a certain hardness and thinness in the mobile nostrils, and a pucker in her throat when she turned her head, made Nessa believe that she might be five or six and thirty, or even more ; for people with that sort of complexion

look young so long. On the whole, Nessa felt disposed to like Mrs. Redmond—she looked so amiable and simple, despite the touch of bistre under her eyes, which surely could not be natural.

But, while Nessa had been coming to this conclusion, the woman had arrived at a far more definite estimation of her character, and decided, amongst other things, that she was a young person whom it would be far easier to lead than to drive.

With the sweet expression still upon her face, Mrs. Redmond turned from Nessa to her husband, with the slightest interrogative lifting of her eyebrows.

‘Miss Grahame came here to pay us a visit,’ he explained, with ill-concealed embarrassment; ‘but I have persuaded her to return to the hotel at Knaresboro’, where she will be more at her ease. We have no accommodation in this wretched old ruin, you know.’

‘Oh, we are not so badly off as that, dear. We can certainly find a room, and if Miss Grahame will accept the best we have——’

‘Well, settle it as you please,’ interrupted Redmond; ‘I’m off for an hour’s shooting;’ and, raising his hat, he turned his back and hurried off—saving himself, as was his habit, from the present difficulty, and leaving the worst for the future.

‘Shall we walk up to the house, dear? Then we can talk as we go along,’ said Mrs. Redmond.

Nessa accepted readily. Mrs. Redmond handed her reins to the old man in livery who occupied the seat beside her, and, stepping to the ground, shook Nessa heartily by the hand.

‘You will bring the luggage up to the house,’ she said to the flyman.

‘Do you know, dear,’ said Mrs. Redmond,

taking Nessa's arm as they walked towards the house, ' this is the first time I ever heard your name ! Men *are* so reserved about business, and I suppose you have some business relations with him ?'

' Oh yes ; he is my guardian. I came here to have an understanding with him about my position.'

' Your guardian ! How odd he should never have told me anything about it ! I feel quite hurt, dear ; it looks almost like a want of confidence. I knew, of course, that Mr. Redmond was a widower when I married him, but he never told me that Mrs. Grahame had left any children. Perhaps he thought I should want to have you with me—as I certainly should, having no children of my own. That was accountable while you were a child, for men do not like children. But you are not a child now. Have you any brothers or sisters ?'

‘No ; I don’t know that I have any relatives at all ; I have never seen, never heard of any,’ said Nessa ; and she gave a brief outline of her life at school, warming up as she went on under the stimulating sympathy of her companion, and telling finally the manner of her leaving Eagle House.

Mrs. Redmond was immensely tickled with her account of the performance, which Nessa gave with considerable humour, being of an impulsive and expansive nature.

‘You can’t tell how glad I am that you have come here, dear,’ said Mrs. Redmond ; ‘and I’m sure that, with the money it would cost to keep you at school, you can provide amply for all your wants. Of course, your mamma left a proper provision for you?’

‘Oh yes. I have a copy of her will in my box. I was to have eight hundred a year during my minority.’

‘Eight hundred a year! That’s quite a great deal. Eight hundred a year!’ she repeated reflectively. ‘But surely, dear, you will soon be of age?’

‘I shall not be of age for three years.’

‘Why, how old can you be?’

‘I was eighteen in June.’

‘Only eighteen! And, of course, when you are twenty-one you will have more even than you have now.’

‘Oh, I shall have everything. This estate —all is left to me.’

Mrs. Redmond stopped with an exclamation that had something of dismay in it; but recovering her self-possession, she drew Nessa’s arm closer to her side, and said :

‘You must forgive me, dear. This is such a surprise, and I feel so wounded to think that my husband should not have told me something about his position. I dare say he has his own independent fortune; but beyond

that he has nothing whatever to come—to come from this estate.'

'Nothing that he can legally claim; but of course,' said Nessa, her generous disposition overcoming her late hostility—'of course I should never—never——'

She hesitated, at a loss to find a phrase that might assure her new friend of a kindly intention without wounding her feelings.

'I know what you would say,' said Mrs. Redmond: 'that if my husband should happen to be in difficulties, and we found ourselves without a penny in the world at the end of three years, you would give us a home and—and food——' She stopped, choked with disappointment, indignation, envy, and malice; but in the next moment she masked her feelings under a Judas' kiss, as she murmured, 'Oh, you dear, dear, generous, kind-hearted friend!'

## CHAPTER IV.

AN embarrassing silence succeeded Mrs. Redmond's effusive outburst as they walked on, and then, happily, Nessa found something else to think about and talk about as they came to the end of the drive, and she got a fair view of the house.

It was a long, gabled building, standing on a terrace, with a gatehouse in the middle flanked by two towers, the gate opening on to a courtyard beyond. The face of the west wing was completely covered with ivy ; the growth on the east wing had been cut away in places to give light to the windows of the inhabited rooms, and stripped down from the richly carved bargeboard of the end gable.

The gatehouse and one of the towers alone showed the rich red bricks of the building and something of its fine architectural details. One of the chimney-stacks in the west wing had fallen ; there was a black hole in the lichen-covered roof where the tiles had been broken in. The weathercock over the gate had lost two of its arms ; a rusted beacon-basket hung from an iron gibbet on the tower. It was very picturesque, but particularly dismal. The ornamental grounds in the foreground gave evidence of neglect that was hardly less depressing to Nessa's spirits than the signs of decay in the fine old house. What must at one time have been a smooth lawn was now nothing but a waste of rank grass and thistles ; clumps of brier and bramble marked the place of flower-beds. The yew hedge skirting the lawn was ragged and patchy ; there was not even a wildflower to give a touch of gaiety to the sombre scene.

‘Oh, I didn’t think it was like this!’ Nessa exclaimed, with an accent of regret.

‘I dare say not. *I* would not have come if I had known what it was like. It’s like a horrid old church, and the rooms smell like vaults. And, look—nothing but trees to be seen. I detest the country.’

‘Then why *did* you come?’

‘Because my husband talked about a pony-chaise, and a fine old mansion, and shooting-parties, and the society of good old county families. I got the pony-chaise—before I left London; but as to the rest—well, that’s the fine old mansion, the only shooting-party I’ve seen is my husband, and the nearest good old family lives three miles off, and is never at home. I’m sorry enough I ever came here; and so are you, dear, already, I dare say.’

‘No, I am not,’ replied Nessa, in a tone of firmness that was not lost upon her observant

companion. ‘ Oh, it’s a shame to let the place go like this ! ’

‘ I suppose somebody is responsible for the estate,’ said Mrs. Redmond tentatively.

‘ I know there is a clause in mamma’s will providing a certain fund for the executor to employ in keeping the house and park in order.’

‘ In addition to a sum for your maintenance, dear ? ’

‘ Yes ; the two are quite distinct. You shall see for yourself. I have brought it with me.’

‘ We will look at it together,’ Mrs. Redmond said eagerly. ‘ I might be able to explain it. Tell me one thing, dear : who is the executor ? ’

‘ Mr. Redmond.’

Mrs. Redmond’s face expressed no surprise now, but rather confirmation in a foregone conclusion, as she nodded her head slowly,

half closing her eyes, her small mouth so tightly pursed that her long upper lip formed an unbroken line with her chin, her thin nostrils whitening with their dilation.

Nessa felt inexpressibly uncomfortable, finding in her hostility to Redmond an ally in his wife. She would rather have dealt with both as enemies or friends.

The flyman had discharged the luggage and was waiting at the gate to be paid. Nessa would have hastened her steps, but Mrs. Redmond detained her.

‘One moment, dear,’ said she, stopping short; ‘do you know how much that fund was for keeping the house in repair?’

‘Two thousand pounds, I think.’

‘And as he has not spent a penny of the money on the place, he will have that nice little sum to answer for when the time comes to settle with you. He can put that off for three years, but,’ she added to herself,

‘there’s another account he’ll have to settle to-night.’

It was past ten when Redmond entered the house. Leaving his gun in the long hall, he opened the door of the library, that served now as a living room, and walked in with as good an air of carelessness as he could assume. A lamp burnt on the oak table ; the shade, casting a bright glare of light upon the dark wood, threw all beyond its circle into darkness. He looked furtively round, and then, encouraged by the silence to hope that there was no one in the room, he tilted the shade and glanced beyond. The light fell upon his wife, stretched at full length on a couch, and lit up her fine eyes, which were fixed on himself.

‘Hope I haven’t woke you up,’ he said lightly.

‘No.’

‘Are you alone ?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where’s Miss Grahame?’

‘Gone to bed.’

There was nothing unusual in Mrs. Redmond’s laconic replies. Neither of them wasted words upon the other in ordinary circumstances. He began to think that things were not so bad as he had expected. That so frequently happens. He sat down, feeling quite amiably disposed towards his wife.

‘Sorry she’s gone,’ he said ; ‘I wanted to make it all right with her. You know I wanted to send her back to Knaresboro’, because I thought she would be such a bother to you, as we have only one servant here.’

‘She will not give *me* any trouble.’

‘I should have come home before, but I met that Johnson, don’t you know, and he would have me go home with him.’

‘Indeed !’

‘Hope you didn’t wait dinner for me?’

‘No ; I knew you wouldn’t come home till you thought the coast was clear. You never do when you’re afraid.’

‘Afraid ! You don’t suppose I fear that gir?’ His voice rose.

‘If you don’t fear her yet awhile, you do me.’ Her voice rose also.

‘May I ask what reason I have to fear you?’ he asked, in that lofty tone assumed by those people who put on what they call ‘side.’

‘You fear me, I suppose, because you have not a great stock of courage. If you cannot imagine any other reason, it’s not worth the trouble of talking about.’

‘Oh, of course, you are angry because I didn’t tell you of the existence of this girl. What was the use of telling you ? You would only have worried about it.’

‘And you do not like being worried, do you ?’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘ There, we will say no more about it.’

And by a considerable effort of self-control she maintained a silence that perplexed and troubled her husband.

At length, affecting a yawn and stretching his arms, he said :

‘ Are you coming up now ?’

‘ No.’

‘ Well, I shall go. I’m done up. By the way,’ he added, rising, ‘ I think I shall go over to the Moor for three or four days’ shooting.’

‘ You needn’t stay away so long. Miss Grahame is going to-morrow.’

‘ Oh, well, I’m glad of that. Where’s she going ?’

‘ To London with me.’

‘ What are you going there for ?’

‘ To see your wife’s will at Somerset House.’

Redmond’s hands dropped into his pockets,

and he stared at his wife in silent astonishment. She was looking now placidly at her toes, which she kept tapping together, as her heels rested on the couch, in a monotonous rhythm.

‘You know what’s in that will,’ he said, with difficulty steadyng his voice.

‘I know what was in the will you showed me when your wife was dying. She left everything to her “dear husband, James Redmond.” But that does not agree with the copy Miss Grahame showed me this evening, in which your wife leaves everything to her “dear daughter, Vanessa Grahame.” I’m going to find out the truth with my young friend.’

He sank down on the chair, looking aghast at his wife. When she languidly turned her eyes towards him, he shifted his chair that the light of the lamp might not fall on his face. She laughed at his discomfiture. There was

no getting out of it ; he wanted now to know the worst.

‘ And what shall you do,’ he asked with an effort, ‘ supposing the will is in favour of that girl ?’

‘ Supposing it is !’ she said, dropping her feet to the ground quickly. ‘ Supposing it is !’ she replied, rising and coming towards him with slow steps that kept time to her words. ‘ You lying, cowardly, mean, miserable, crawling cad—you *know* it is ! And you ask me what I shall do, as if I were fool enough to show my hand to such a shuffling trickster as you ! One thing you may be sure of—I shan’t stay to go down in a sinking ship with you. And go down you will, as surely as any other fool who puts out in a rotten shell. I shall see you in rags whining for charity to the girl you have robbed—if you are not sent to prison for robbing children in the streets : that’s the only crime you have the courage for.’

He did not attempt to defend himself. She looked at the supine villain in mute disgust for a minute ; then her rage rising again with the sense that she had been hoaxed by such a creature, she continued :

‘ The will you showed me when your wife was dying was a forgery—you admit it’—he did not deny it, but sat in stolid silence—‘ you forged it to hoodwink me. I believed it was a forgery, but I gave you credit for enough courage to stand by the forgery for your own sake. Why didn’t you let the will stand, you fool ?’

‘ I should have been found out ; she had already made a will—the will that exists. It was too obvious that she would not leave all to me, for it was known that we did not live happily ; and I—I—I couldn’t get the signature right. I—I couldn’t sleep until it was burnt.’

‘ You thought only of your own comfort—of

sleeping easily. You never thought about me. You were content with having tricked me —with taking me out of the profession to satisfy your wretched jealousy, with leading me to throw away a dozen chances of settling well. I might have had any man I chose.'

' You preferred me.'

' Why ? Not for your virtues. You know it was for a fortune I accepted you. And having got me to believe in your promise, you did nothing to fulfil it.'

' Yes, I did. I took her brother's name out of the codicil and put in my own. That was safe. It gave us twelve thousand pounds, and you've had your share of it. I didn't do that without risk. The will would have been disputed if the brother hadn't died in the very nick of time, thank goodness !'

' How much is there left of that money ?'

' Not a penny. I'm cutting the trees to pay your debts. It's you who have spent it.'

‘You will have to be more careful in the future — especially in your dealings with women. Before a week’s out you will have to answer for the money you have misappropriated, and you won’t cut a stick, unless it’s your own, after to-morrow.’

He wiped the perspiration from his face with his trembling hand.

‘I’ve done everything for the best,’ he whined. ‘Heaven knows I haven’t got much pleasure by it. It was all for you. I shouldn’t have done it for myself. You’re not going to hunt me down for that, are you?’

She had seated herself, and sat tapping the ground impatiently with her feet. Her silence encouraged him to hope—faintly.

‘It’s no good flogging a dead horse,’ he muttered.

She turned upon him with a jerk, and an exclamation of disgust and contempt.

‘Dead horse! If you had the spirit of a cur I could hate you less.’

‘You can do yourself no good ; she can’t touch a farthing of her fortune for three years. Why not let things go on till the worst comes ?’

‘Do you think the girl will wait passively while you rob her for three years ? Not she. She doesn’t need my help—doesn’t want it. If I help her it is simply to help myself.’

‘She can do nothing without money. You have not lent her anything ?’

‘No.’

‘Then what can she do ? She has no friends.’

‘None ?’

‘Not a soul. She can’t get to London without money ; and if she could, what lawyer would open a suit in Chancery without seeing his fees ? You have not promised to take her to a lawyer ?’

‘It wouldn’t matter what I had promised if I altered my purpose.’

‘You won’t take her, Maud,’ he entreated.

‘Can you suggest anything more to my advantage?’

She turned about and looked him steadily in the face as she slowly put the question.

He tried to meet her eyes, that he might learn from them what it was she expected of him.

‘We have been a long while coming to the point; but I thought it might be worth while,’ she continued in the same slow, suggestive undertone. ‘I should have sat up all night to speak to you on the subject.’

She paused again, giving him time to get the idea she had led up to.

He blinked under her fixed regard, and then faltered.

‘Of course, I will do all I can for you.

Three years is a good long time. And the timber is valuable.'

' Bah ! ' she exclaimed, turning away once more in impatient disgust. ' You are only fit to be a pickpocket.' And then, as quickly turning back upon him : ' Do you think I am to be satisfied with despicable pilfering ? Do you think a few pounds—a few thousands, if you like—do you think that will recompense me for the best years of my life that have been thrown away upon you ?'

' What can I do ? ' he asked, in a piteous tone of helplessness.

' What can you do ? ' she repeated. ' Why, get me the whole of that fortune for which I married you.'

' How can I—how can I ? The money can only come to me, even by that codicil, in the event of the girl's death.'

Mrs. Redmond rose from her chair and crossed noiselessly to the door. She opened

it quickly, and glanced up and down the hall ; then she closed it, and returning to her husband, said :

‘ You’ve got it at last ! That’s it ! The girl must die !’

## CHAPTER V.

NESSA awoke suddenly. In the confusion of ideas and impressions at that moment, she was conscious of a shapeless dream, of a brusque movement, of a light dazzling her eyes, and of a voice murmuring unintelligibly in her ear. Then, as her intelligence awakened, she perceived that she was crouching on the floor beside a bed, that the dazzling light was nothing more than a chamber candle, and that somebody was supporting her, whom she presently recognised as Mrs. Redmond.

‘What is it? Where am I?’ she gasped in bewilderment.

‘It’s all right, dear. You are in your own room. See, this is your bed. Don’t be

frightened ! You're awake now, aren't you ? You know who I am !'

Nessa rose to her feet, and, still dazed, looked about her. She recognised the deep dormer windows—the leaded panes of the casement she had put open, on which the light of the moon was now reflected. It was Mrs. Redmond by her side, with the long plait of shining yellow hair falling over her shoulders on the crimson dressing-gown.

' When did I come here ? I don't understand,' she said.

' Why, you came here last evening. Oh dear, what a fright you have given me !'

Mrs. Redmond sank down on the side of the bed, putting her hand to her heart. The candle on the floor, where Mrs. Redmond had set it, flared in the current of night air from the open window.

' What have I been doing ?' asked Nessa, now wide awake.

‘ You’ve been walking in your sleep, that’s all : but you scared me out of my wits.’

‘ Walking in my sleep !’ Nessa repeated incredulously.

‘ Yes, dear—you were half way down the great stairs. When I heard the stairs creak, I thought it must be my husband come home. Oh, you can’t tell what a turn it gave me when I caught sight of you there in your white nightdress ! I knew you must be asleep by the way in which you felt the wall as you went along. Your eyes were quite closed when I came to your side, and you suffered me to lead you gently back to your room like a little child. But in attempting to lift you into bed I woke you ; and the moment your eyes opened your strength seemed to go, and you fell down. Don’t you remember ?’

‘ I don’t remember anything !’ exclaimed

Nessa, 'not anything. Oh, I am so sorry I frightened you.'

'Don't say a word about that. I am only too happy to have heard you. Heaven only knows what might have happened in a horrid old den like this if I had not discovered you ! There's a door somewhere that opens into the tower, where the floor has rotted away. If you had gone through there nothing could have saved you : you must have been killed. Get into bed, dear.'

Nessa obeyed, quite overcome with astonishment at what she heard.

'Is it late ?' she asked.

Mrs. Redmond, looking at the watch on the table as she picked up the light, told her it was half-past twelve, and then offered to stay with her ; but Nessa would not listen to this. So, after a little half-hearted persistence on Mrs. Redmond's part—she seeming much more terrified than Nessa—they said 'good-

night' with an exchange of kisses, and Mrs. Redmond went down to her bedroom on the floor below.

Redmond was waiting there in the dark, his hands in his pockets thumbing a piece of paper into pellets, in anxious suspense. He raised his eyebrows interrogatively as his wife entered with her finger raised ; she replied with a nod signifying that the prepared scene had been acted satisfactorily.

' She was lying on the edge of her bed,' whispered Mrs. Redmond, after closing the door carefully ; ' I pushed her down on to the floor, and when she woke up, staring about her like a fool, I made her believe I had found her half-way downstairs, walking in her sleep. Remember that ; it won't do to tell two stories.'

' I won't forget,' muttered Redmond approvingly.

' Now, as I've made a beginning, we'll just

settle clearly what's to be done next, and what part you are to play.'

Redmond nodded, and they sat down together and plotted the destruction of the girl who slept over their heads.

Nessa woke early the following morning, invigorated by her long sleep, and feeling not a pin the worse for what had happened in the night. It returned to her memory as she crossed the room to look out of the dormer window, and then only aroused a pleasant self-interest. Most young persons feel flattered by the discovery that they are distinguished from the rest by some peculiarity.

It was quite early—not yet seven o'clock. She shrewdly guessed that Mrs. Redmond was not the kind of woman who rises early, and would not be down to breakfast before ten o'clock, or thereabouts; so she would have three hours for exploring the old house and looking about her. After all, she reflected,

it was not so bad. It was wonderfully romantic ; and the prospect of a severe tussle with Mr. Redmond was rather cheerful than depressing. She did not bear much malice in her young heart. It was pretty clear he had misappropriated some money ; but everyone is liable to get into difficulties, and we have all faults to be forgiven. Very likely she and he would dislike each other at first ; but if they both gave way, and showed forbearance, they might in the end settle down comfortably. In three years she would have more money than ever she could know what to do with, and she should not miss, and certainly would not begrudge, the sum necessary to put the old house in order, and make some provision for Mr. and Mrs. Redmond without hurting that poor lady's feelings.

With these charitable intentions she occupied her thoughts while she dressed, and that took no time. Then she began to explore the

house, admiring the wonderful old furniture, and the pictures on the noble staircase, which looked all the finer for the dim light percolating through the ivy-screened windows. Going no further than the threshold of the very dark rooms, from a fear of rats and rotten floors, and shrinking back with a shiver from the black soil on the other side of the heavy iron-bound door on the landing, which undoubtedly must be the floorless tower that Mrs. Redmond had spoken about in the night, she went down through the old hall, with its trophies of antlers and armour, pausing before the modern sword and plumed hat hung between tigers' skins with the proud conception that her father had worn that hat and carried that sword into battle ; and then she passed out into the open air.

How fresh and sweet and bracing the morning breeze seemed after the musty smell of those dark old rooms ! She got her feet wet

in the rank grass crossing to have a full view of the house. It was a grand old building—that it was. No wonder she exulted in the knowledge that it belonged to her ; that she would be sole mistress there in a few years, with the possession of all the grounds about, with their magnificent trees. She spent a good ten minutes trying to settle how she would have the buildings and grounds arranged so that their character might be retained, at the same time that they would be a cheerful residence for herself, where she might invite all her school friends to come, and Tinkleton, and old Mrs. Vic as well. Her bosom swelled with the most delicious plans of entertaining everyone she knew in the most magnificent style—always, of course, without pretentious ostentation on her own part. And then she ran in to write to all those friends and tell them all about it, feeling, as she ran, that it was good to live.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Mrs. Redmond came down. Nessa had been writing all the time ; but she was not a bit fatigued, and could have found twice as much to say.

Mrs. Redmond was astonished to find her so fresh and bright after what had happened in the night. She was disposed to regard it as a very serious matter. Nessa laughed at it.

‘ You must lock me up, and then I shan’t frighten you any more,’ she said.

But Mrs. Redmond would not treat the affair lightly. She knew so many instances—mostly drawn from works of fiction—in which sleep-walking had led to fatal consequences ; and gave them in such lengthy detail that it seemed she could think of nothing else.

‘ Is Mr. Redmond coming down to breakfast ?’ Nessa asked, on the first opportunity, by way of changing the subject.

‘ My dear, I haven’t seen him since we met in the park yesterday,’ Mrs. Redmond replied, with the utmost coolness. ‘ When there’s anything unpleasant at home he generally finds business to keep him away. And knowing what he has to expect from us, it’s very likely that he won’t show his face here for a week. We certainly will not wait breakfast for him.’

She rang the bell, to Nessa’s hearty satisfaction, but turning, she asked :

‘ Did you ever see the opera of *Sonnambula*, dear ?’

Nessa shook her head.

‘ Oh dear, oh dear !’ she said to herself. ‘ Now she’s got on to plays, I shall hear all about Lady Macbeth, and nobody knows who else !’

But Mrs. Redmond’s solicitude took a new channel when the girl brought in the tea and eggs.

‘How’s your head this morning, Emma?’ she asked.

The heavy, sallow-skinned young woman passed the back of her hand over her dull eyes, and replied that it was still ‘a-splitting fit to bust,’ and attributed her disorder to ‘the boil.’

‘It is nothing of the kind,’ said Mrs. Redmond decisively. ‘The doctor must see you. Tell Denis to get the chaise ready for me. I shall want it in an hour. I am sure that dreadful girl is sickening for something,’ she added to Nessa. ‘It may be scarlet-fever or smallpox. We will go over to Knaresboro’, and call upon Dr. Shaw, if you would like the drive. I have a perfect horror of illness.’

Nessa accepted the invitation readily.

‘I shall be ready in half an hour,’ said Mrs. Redmond when they rose from the table. ‘Have you any letters for the post?’

‘Yes ; all these.’

‘Give them to me, and I will put them in the bag, dear.’

Then there was some discussion about what they should wear, and Nessa ran up to her room to dress.

As soon as she was out of sight, Mrs. Redmond took the letters up to her room, where her husband was sitting in a dressing-gown, with a bottle of whisky and a sporting paper for refreshment. She laid the letters side by side on the table with the flaps upward, soaked a handkerchief, and spread it carefully over them. Then she began to dress. Taking off the handkerchief ten minutes later, she found that the flaps yielded to the insertion of a knife-blade.

‘Open them and read what she has been writing about,’ she said in a whisper.

Redmond, who had been watching the proceeding in silence, obeyed.

‘ Does she talk about walking in her sleep ? ’  
the woman asked.

‘ Oh yes ; something about it in everyone of  
them.’

Mrs. Redmond expressed her satisfaction by  
a nod.

‘ No suspicion that she has been deceived ? ’

‘ Not a word.’

‘ That will all serve as evidence on our side  
if there should be any question. Close the  
letters carefully, and send them to the post  
when we are gone. I’m going to take her over  
to Dr. Shaw. She must have something to  
take—a mixture of some kind.’

She was standing beside Redmond, plaiting  
her hair, as he replaced the letters and closed  
the envelopes. He nodded without looking  
up.

‘ It will have to be done to-night for certain,’  
she continued. ‘ You can settle where she’s  
to fall from. We shall be back about four.

You'd better keep out of the way till you're wanted.'

Redmond's hands trembled so violently that he had to lay down the letter he was trying to enclose.

Mrs. Redmond turned from him in silence with a contemptuous jerk of her head. When she looked in the glass to see if her hair was all right, she caught a glimpse of him wiping the perspiration from his livid face with a handkerchief.

'Remember,' she said, going back to him, 'there's no shuffling out of this. It's your only escape from the gaol and the workhouse. If you're not here when the time comes, I'll take the girl away, as I promised, and set the lawyers to work.'

## CHAPTER VI.

NESSA enjoyed the drive to Knaresboro' intensely. The rapid movement, the fresh air, the beauty of the sky and trees, with their undergrowth of golden brake and reddening bramble, together with a sense of freedom and nascent power, intoxicated her. Her exuberant gaiety and young enthusiasm made her the most delightful companion in the world, even to Mrs. Redmond, who detested the country, and saw only horrid toadstools and scraggy wildflowers in the coloured fungus and stray harebells that drew exclamations of delight from the girl.

Mrs. Redmond allowed her to take the reins and whip while she changed her gloves as

they neared the little town. That was a supreme joy for Nessa—a foretaste of that future when she would have such an equipage, but with *two* ponies, and all to herself.

They left the chaise at the hotel, where Mrs. Redmond ordered lunch to be prepared, and went through the High Street, and here Nessa had a glorious quarter of an hour before some drapery and millinery stores. Long ago she had successfully rebelled against walking out in procession with the young ladies of Eagle House, and obtained the privilege of going out with Miss Tinkleton alone; but that was a tame affair indeed in comparison with shop-gazing in the company of a woman of the world with expensive tastes, like Mrs. Redmond. Poor old Tinkleton's taste was all for prints that would wash and stuffs that would turn, and she could look at nothing that was not marked a bargain at something—three-farthings, whereas Mrs. Redmond had an

eye for colour and effect, and fixed her critical choice upon the most delightfully delicate and ephemeral fabrics with a reckless regard to cost.

She laughed at Nessa's old-fashioned notions, and the girl, only too anxious to learn what was 'correct' in this new world to which she was born, took the rebuke gratefully, and liked her friend all the better for it. Nessa, impulsive, affectionate, and utterly ignorant of evil, saw nothing in her new friend to dislike, and a great deal that struck her inexperienced mind with admiration. She clung to Mrs. Redmond's plump arm, and, in the fulness of her heart, could ill conceal the warmth of her feelings. Mrs. Redmond was not dull to this silent homage; it was a long time since she had encountered anyone so fresh and naïve and bright. She really liked the girl—as much as it was in her nature to like anyone—and quite regretted her approaching loss. Nevertheless,

she did not for one instant hesitate to ring the bell when they came to Dr. Shaw's house at the bottom of the hill. By that time Nessa had entirely forgotten the ostensible object of their drive to Knaresboro'.

They were shown into the consulting-room. Presently the inner door opened, and Dr. Shaw came in—a meagre, elderly man, with dark, penetrating eyes, deep-sunk under a broad white forehead. He bowed stiffly to Mrs. Redmond, and smiled on Nessa as he took his seat.

‘I've come to see you again about that dreadful girl, Emma,’ said Mrs. Redmond.

The doctor inclined his head, and resigned himself to the inevitable. Not a week passed without a visit from this woman upon some imaginary ailment of her own or Emma's. He listened, his eyes resting on the paper-knife with which his long fingers toyed, but his thoughts were occupied with Nessa. Who

was she? How had she fallen into the hands of Mrs. Redmond? He disliked Mrs. Redmond. He knew her and her vices, and wondered how anyone else could fail to see physical and moral unhealthiness through the palpable mask of paint and dye and society manners.

‘It’s an ordinary bilious attack—nothing more,’ he said, as Mrs. Redmond concluded her account of Emma’s symptoms.

‘I believe it is the beginning of a fever. I must beg you to come and see her. If it’s anything catching I must send her away to her friends at once.’

‘I am very much occupied. However, if you insist, I will do my best to call in the course of the day.’

‘Oh, thanks, awfully—thanks! And now, doctor, I wish you to prescribe for this young lady,’ Mrs. Redmond said, laying her hand on Nessa’s arm.

Dr. Shaw looked sharply at the girl, who seemed no less astonished than himself by this demand. He smiled as Nessa's surprise gave way to uncontrollable mirth.

‘There's nothing whatever to laugh at,’ said Mrs. Redmond. ‘It is not natural, and it is certainly dangerous, for a young girl to walk in her sleep.’

The doctor assented to this, and listened with serious attention to Mrs. Redmond's account of the affair, while Nessa sat with bent head, amused and vexed by turns. It was so ridiculous to make a fuss about such a trifle.

‘You do not look a likely subject for nervous disorders of this sort,’ he said kindly.

‘I am sure I have never misbehaved myself before—in that way,’ she replied, with a laugh.

‘You have never been so violently excited

as you were yesterday and the day before,' suggested Mrs. Redmond.

Nessa admitted that this was true.

'Of course,' said Dr. Shaw, 'great and unusual mental excitement might account for a case of this kind, but I really see no cause for serious alarm. There is no reason to fear a repetition of the attack, especially if the excitement abates.'

'But the excitement may not abate—the attack may be repeated,' insisted Mrs. Redmond.

'Then you had better have someone to sleep in the same room for a few nights.'

'I couldn't. I should never be able to close my eyes for fear of something happening. And you cannot expect me to put a servant in the room who is probably sickening for some infectious complaint. Surely you can give something to produce sleep?'

The doctor reflected a moment. What was

he to do with this obstinate fool of a woman? If he refused to administer anything, he was perfectly sure that she would go to the chemist and procure some poisonous stuff, such as she herself was in the habit of taking—a concoction strong enough to half kill a young girl unaccustomed to the use of narcotics. The best way was to comply with the request, and practise a harmless deception. With this conclusion he rose, saying that possibly a mild sedative might have a good effect, and left the ladies for a few minutes.

‘It will do you no harm to take this before going to bed,’ he said, putting a bottle into Nessa’s hand when he returned.

That was true enough; the bottle contained nothing but water tinctured with cochineal and disguised with peppermint.

Mrs. Redmond went away triumphant. But she was not simple enough to believe that she had overcome the doctor’s scruples. When

they returned to the Towers, and she was alone in her room, she took the bottle from her sealskin bag, in which she had put it 'for safety,' removed the paper carefully, and poured away the pink liquid. She refilled the bottle from one of her own. The efficacy of that mixture in producing sleep she knew.

'Dr. Shaw is responsible for whatever happens now,' she said to herself, as she wrapped the bottle in the paper she had taken it from.

They dined alone. Nessa tasted champagne for the first time, and liked it. It looked so pretty in the delicate glass held up to the light, with the string of bubbles rising from the bottom, and it was quite as nice to the taste as lemonade—nicer, in fact. She agreed with Mrs. Redmond that it was the only thing a lady ought to drink at dinner, and resolved that when the time came she would fill her

cellars with the wines her friend talked about so glibly, and learn the difference between them. They lingered over dessert, Nessa listening with avidity to Mrs. Redmond's airy gossip about London, and that wonderful society in which lords and dukes seemed to be as plentiful as heart could desire. Oh, what a contrast between this life of delicious trifling and the ponderous routine of her late existence, when one scuttled away from the table the moment a meal was finished, with nothing better than instructive recreation to look forward to !

It was getting dusk when Mrs. Redmond rose from her chair and changed the subject. It was clear that Dr. Shaw would not come now. Emma had better go to bed ; she was certainly sickening for something, and there was nothing else for her to do. She went into the kitchen and sent the heavy girl, nothing loath, to her room. Upstairs, Mrs.

Redmond found her husband, with a face the colour of lead, pacing the bedroom.

‘Are you ready?’ she asked in a low tone, as she took up the sealskin bag.

He nodded in silence; and then, overcoming the difficulty of speaking, he faltered:

‘For Heaven’s sake, be quick!’

She scanned the quaking coward from head to foot, and, seeing his irresolution, thought it advisable on quitting the room to turn the key upon him.

Downstairs she found Nessa sitting in the gloaming by the open window, and for the first time that day looking grave. Her mind seemed to have taken on the subdued tone of the trees and sky.

Mrs. Redmond sat down in the chair opposite, the bag in her lap.

‘Why, how awfully solemn you look!’ she exclaimed.

‘I have been thinking,’ said Nessa; and

then, in a tone of interrogation, she added :  
‘ Mr. Redmond has not come home ? ’

‘ No. Surely that has nothing to do with your gravity ? ’

‘ Yes, it has. I have something to tell him.’

Mrs. Redmond laughed.

‘ Of course you have, my dear ; so have I. He’s perfectly aware of that, and keeps out of our way in consequence.’

‘ But I want to apologize to him.’

‘ Apologize ? ’ exclaimed Mrs. Redmond with superb disdain. ‘ *I* never apologized to anyone in all my life ! ’

‘ Not when you had to acknowledge yourself in the wrong ? ’

‘ I never did have to acknowledge myself in the wrong, my dear.’

‘ How nice ! ’ said Nessa naïvely, with a sigh. ‘ I’m always doing wrong, and finding it out just when it’s too late.’

‘I should like to know what wrong you’ve done to my precious husband.’

‘I—I have been thinking that I was very rude to him yesterday.’

‘Rude! Well, when you find a man robbing you——’

‘But I’m not sure that he has robbed me. I have no right to demand an account until I am twenty-one, and then he may be prepared to render it.’

‘If I tell you that he has spent every penny of the money entrusted to him for your maintenance, that he is hopelessly in debt, and is cutting down the timber to pay his current expenses—what then?’

‘Then I am very sorry for him. He must have been very unfortunate to lose the money—he must have made some great mistake. I have made so many that I should be the last to think unkindly of him on that account.’

Mrs. Redmond said nothing, but she felt disappointed in Nessa.

‘ That’s why I wanted to see him,’ the girl continued, in the same reflective tone. ‘ I am so happy here that I should like to be at peace with everyone. After all, a few thousand pounds out of my fortune is no great loss ; and a great many trees might be cut down and never be missed. And then, if I could help him to recover his losses, I should like to, for I am sure that he would not wilfully do me any harm. I have wronged him. Oh, you don’t know what dreadful things I thought he might be guilty of doing !’

‘ And pray what reason have you to change your opinion ?’

‘ Why, surely a man who is afraid to face a schoolgirl cannot be capable of such desperate designs ?’

Mrs. Redmond made no response, but sat

nursing her knee, and eying, sidelong, the girl, who had fallen into a reverie.

She hesitated about taking this final step. She was not sure of her husband. He might betray himself in some paroxysm of remorse. If he got the inheritance, he would assuredly try to do her out of her fair share in the plunder. One thing was on her side: she could hold him pretty well under her thumb by threats of denunciation. On the other hand, this young girl was a perfect fool in worldly matters, with a sentimental side to her character which might be worked on to advantage. With careful management, a girl like that could be bled of half her fortune. Might it not be better to let her live? Unfortunately she would not have her fortune for three years, and in that time the ductile girl might develop into a particularly unmanageable woman—especially if she married. Added to that, they might fall out. And if there

should arise any cause for jealousy, quarrel they would to a certainty, and then 'good-bye' to any hope of gain from Nessa. No ; that would not do.

With this reflection, Mrs. Redmond pressed the fastening of her bag. It opened with a snap that aroused Nessa.

' My dear, we were both going to sleep, I do believe,' said Mrs. Redmond. ' Get a glass. Here's the mixture Dr. Shaw told you to take.'

It had grown so dark that they had to light the lamp to find a clean glass. Mrs. Redmond poured out the drug, Nessa holding the glass, laughing and protesting. When the bottle was emptied, Nessa, with a wry face, lifted the glass to her lips, and drained off the syrup.

' But it's too early to go to bed yet,' she said, setting down the empty glass.

' Oh yes. We will sit down and have a good long chat.'

They sat down ; but soon Nessa found her friend's light gossip growing unaccountably inaudible, while an insurmountable drowsiness crept upon her senses. Mrs. Redmond watched her keenly, and chatted on until the girl's lids dropped.

' You had better go up to your room, dear.'

Nessa roused herself with an effort, and in a state of stupor submitted to be guided upstairs. When they were in the little bedroom, she sat down on the bed, and, with a last effort of consciousness, threw her arms about her friend's neck and kissed her. Mrs. Redmond did not consider it necessary to return the kiss, for Nessa was already asleep. She stood over her for some minutes. Then she raised the sleeping girl's arm and let it drop. It fell inert. She shook her. Nessa made no sign of consciousness.

Mrs. Redmond went downstairs and un-

locked the door of her room. Her husband stood against the window—his figure just visible against the gray light.

‘Come on,’ she said, beckoning him from the door.

He followed her automatically up the stairs.

## CHAPTER VII.

NESSA lay where she had sunk, her cheek pressing the pillow, her head thrown backward towards the wall. She breathed inaudibly; her bosom rose and fell with gentle regularity. Mrs. Redmond brought the light close to her eyes; the lids, slightly parted, showed the blank, white body of the upturned ball under the long, curved fringe of the lashes, but they made no movement.

She turned to her husband, who stood at the foot of the bed, craning his neck to watch the experiment with the earnestness of a surgeon following the course of an operation. He nodded satisfaction. She called Nessa by her name, raised her into a sitting posture,

and let her fall back again upon the pillow, without making any visible effect upon the sleeper's senses.

‘Come on! Do your work!’ said Mrs. Redmond.

He drew back to the door, beckoning her.

‘Where's the girl—Emma?’ he asked in a whisper when she joined him.

‘In her bedroom, and asleep this last half-hour.’

‘I shan't do it on the parapet. I looked at it this morning. It isn't natural that she should get out of the window.’

‘Where shall you put her then?’

He pointed down the corridor.

‘Is it all ready?’

‘Come and see. Give me the light.’

He took the candle, and she followed him down the corridor, away from the staircase, and towards the unoccupied side of the house. Beyond Nessa's room the wainscoted walls

were gray with the dust of years. Cobwebs tapestryed the angles of the unused doors, and hung in ragged festoons from the low ceiling. At the further end there were signs of humidity : the boards yielded to the pressure of the foot ; there was a growth of crimped, yellow fungus in the old moulding of the lower wainscot panels. The old door that closed the corridor was green in one corner, where the rats had gnawed the rotten wood away and given passage to the damp air ; a prismatic slime marked the course taken by a slug ; the great hinges, the rivet heads, the heavy bolt and hand ring were crusted with red rust.

They stopped. Mrs. Redmond drew her skirts together and glanced to the right and left in horror. She had courage enough for murder, but went in mortal dread of a spider !

Redmond pulled the ring, and the door,

grating hoarsely on its hinges, swung back against the wall, showing a space of impenetrable darkness beyond. He dropped on his knees and thrust out the hand that held the light, the candle flaring and guttering in the current of cold air.

Mrs. Redmond stepped boldly to the doorsill and looked in. She now distinguished brickwork on the opposite side, and knew that this must be the tower of which she had heard. It had once been floored, but the roof had fallen in and broken away the rotten planks, leaving nothing but a couple of mouldering cross-beams and a narrow ledge of crumbling woodwork just beyond the sill.

‘What is down there?’ asked Mrs. Redmond. ‘Is it deep enough?’

Redmond took a brick from the *débris* that lay on the ledge and dropped it. One might have counted twenty before the hollow sound that followed reached their ears.

‘That will do !’ said the woman.

They left the door open and returned to Nessa’s room. There Mrs. Redmond took the light, and nodded to her husband to do his work. For a moment he hesitated, looking down on the sleeping girl and rubbing one clammy hand against the other, his moustache twitching with the convulsive movement of his lips ; then, with the energy of desperation, he suddenly caught hold of her and lifted her upon his shoulders. Now that he had overcome his moral weakness his physical vigour was capable of any strain. He was like those beasts of prey, also for the most part cowards, who lose all sense of fear from the moment they are nerved to make the attack.

He carried Nessa down the corridor quickly, as if she had been a mere infant. When his wife came up with the flickering light, he laid the supine girl down on the

edge of the door-sill. That was not the easiest thing to do ; it required dexterity and strength of no ordinary kind. The sill was not long enough to lay her out at full length ; her shoulders had to be raised and placed against the edge of the wall. Without a firm grip the flaccid body would have slipped from his hands ; a clumsy movement would have broken away the rotten wood on which she rested.

‘ That will do,’ said he, when he had disposed of her to his satisfaction. ‘ The slightest movement will finish her. If she only turns her head she must topple over.’

He was still kneeling with his hand on Nessa’s shoulder. Mrs. Redmond bent down.

‘ If a touch will do it, why not push her down and be done with it?’ she asked.

He knelt there meditating on this sugges-

tion for a moment in silence ; then, rising and turning his cunning eyes on his wife, he said :

‘ You do it.’

‘ Not I,’ she replied ; ‘ I’ve done my share. I am not going to have a murder to answer for.’

‘ Nor I neither,’ said he, taking the light roughly from her hand.

He looked to Nessa’s position again, and then carefully closed the door upon her and shot the bolt. They stood there in silence, listening for the sounds that must come—a brush against the door, the rattle of rubbish falling down the pit, the scream of terror, the crashing of rotten woodwork, and then that dull, muffled sound welling up from below to tell that Nessa was killed.

‘ What are we waiting here for ?’ asked Mrs. Redmond with quick impatience, seized with a sudden panic she could not account for.

‘ She is not likely to move of her own accord for hours.’

They went back through the passage—he first ; hastening to get away from the place and escape the awful sounds their ears were straining to catch. The panic was upon them both now. Near Nessa’s empty room he stopped suddenly, catching his breath with a rattle in his parched throat.

‘ What !’ ejaculated she, clutching his arm.

It was a trifle—nothing. His foot had struck against the shoe that had fallen from Nessa’s foot as he carried her along. Yet this little thing had crisped the hair on his head and paralyzed him for the moment.

His wife pushed angrily past him as the light fell on the shoe. He hurried after her, sick with the dread of being there alone. They stopped on the landing below, holding their breath to listen. They heard nothing but the rushing of the blood in their ears.

They were under a terrible fascination, possessed by an irresistible anxiety to catch the sounds that in anticipation terrified them.

They entered the adjoining room, treading noiselessly, as if a sleeper were there whom they feared to wake. He set down the light upon the table. There was a bottle of whisky there, but he could not find the force to fill the tumbler that stood beside it. She, less irresolute, poured some water into the basin and sponged her face, attributing her weakness and sense of suffocation to the closeness of the night.

She stopped in drying her hands as she caught sight of her husband staring with outstretched neck towards the door. He stood in shadow there, but she could see his white face turned towards the stairs. After waiting a minute, motionless, she crossed the room hastily, the towel in her hand, and coming to his side, said, in a whisper :

‘ Is it over ?’

He shook his head without moving from his position.

‘ Go out or come in, for Heaven’s sake !’ she muttered.

She returned to the table, and half-filled the tumbler with spirits. When she had drunk she pushed the glass across to Redmond, who had come back from the door ; but he took no notice of it, having his face still turned towards the door.

‘ Drink !’ she said imperatively.

He turned eagerly, took up the glass in his trembling fingers, and emptied it ; then, seating himself, he turned his face again to the dark space outside the room.

It was no good fighting against that fascination. Her eyes took the same direction as his, her ears straining for the last despairing cry of that voice which had brightened the day with laughter and lively chat. Now that

the colour was washed from her face, she looked scarcely less livid than her husband in the feeble light of the candle that stood on the table between them. Every moment added to the terror of their situation, and brought fresh horror to their wild imagination.

Supposing the fall should not kill her, he thought—supposing from the bottom of the tower she should cry in agony for help ? She could not be left there to die. The servant, when she got up in the morning, would hear her. Should he have to kill her outright ? How ? Must he lower a light to see where she lay, and then loosen a beam, to throw it down to crush her ? He recollects torturing a cat in his boyhood: The thing would not die. It fastened its teeth and claws on the iron bar he thrust at it. He dared not put his heel on it ; he dared not leave it, for fear it should drag its broken body into the light and betray him. Supposing he failed to kill Nessa

from above—if her cries brought help, and she was brought up, mangled and torn, to convict him with her last breath !

The sweat dropped from his face. The suspense was interminable. Would the end never come ? His wife had said that of her own accord Nessa would not move for hours ; but surely hours had passed since then. Yet that could not be ; the candle his wife had lit was not yet burned an inch. It might burn to the socket before their torture was over.

And then, when the light was out, when the cry came, what was to be done ? Who was to put the door open that it might appear Nessa had opened it and fallen in her sleep ? How was the night to be passed before they could go through the scene laid down by his wife of pretending to miss Nessa ; of sending the girl to inquire if she felt unwell ; of making a

search, and facing the world when the broken body was found and brought to light?

These were consequences that must be faced if all went as they expected; but if some unanticipated difficulty arose—if she should not be killed outright! Then Redmond's frenzied imagination conjured up new horrors.

Suddenly he started, and turned to his wife with gaping mouth. Her lip, too, had fallen. They had both heard it—a sound; but not that they listened for. Somebody was moving downstairs.

A step in the hall! Silence! Another step! Silence! Husband and wife stared at each other aghast, without realizing the cause of their terror. A sharp rap, tap, tap! Somebody must be knocking at the hall door with a stick.

It occurred to Mrs. Redmond that the hall

door had been left unlocked—never before had a visitor come after dark ; yet it was obvious someone had come into the house. But she still sat, spellbound with a nameless fear. Another interval of silence, brief in itself, yet painfully protracted to the two conscience-stricken wretches ; then the handle of a door turned.

‘ You must go down and see who it is,’ Mrs. Redmond said.

Her husband shrank back, shaking his head. She snatched up the light, and went out of the room. He waited till the room was in darkness, listening for a sound from below and for that sound from above ; and then, unable to endure the suspense, and in craven fear of the obscurity, he crept after his wife. Better be down there than be found quivering up here, if that cry came, and this visitor should rush up to discover the cause.

It was Dr. Shaw. He had walked into the living-room, seeing a light there. It had slipped out of Mrs. Redmond's mind that she had asked him to come and see Emma. His first words when he saw Mrs. Redmond were :

‘Good gracious, madam ! what is the matter ?’

He had never before seen her without colour on her face. But even colour would not have disguised her agitation from his penetrating eyes.

She made some excuse about the weather and her nerves, with as much self-composure as she could assume.

Just then Redmond, reassured by her tone of voice, ventured into the room. The two ghastly faces presented a curious spectacle to the student of physiognomy, and excited odd speculations.

‘The weather seems to have affected you

also, Mr. Redmond,' said the doctor, taking his limp wet hand.

Redmond faltered a perfectly unintelligible answer.

'If they had been doing a murder, they couldn't look more guilty,' said the doctor to himself, dropping Redmond's hand with inward disgust, and seating himself.

'We didn't hope to see you so late,' said Mrs. Redmond with an effort.

'It is late,' assented Dr. Shaw, looking at his watch. 'Half-past nine.'

Only half-past nine! It should have been past midnight by the feelings of the woman and her husband.

'My round has been long; I was kept in the village,' the doctor continued. 'How is the girl?'

'I have sent her to bed,' Mrs. Redmond answered, recollecting Emma for the first time. 'I think I frightened myself for

nothing. It is only a bilious attack, and I am sorry I troubled you to come out of your way, doctor.'

Dr. Shaw accepted the apology with a bend of the head.

'And my other patient—the somnambulist?' The doctor addressed the woman, but his eye was on the man, who, with his head turned a little on one side, seemed to be listening, and with an intense concentration of his faculties that totally alienated his mind from other considerations. The doctor asked himself what on earth the man had been doing, with a perfect certainty that he was in mortal dread of discovery.

'She, too, has gone to lie down,' said Mrs. Redmond in reply to the doctor's question. 'Indeed, I left her in her room sound asleep, thanks to your mixture.'

If she had been mistress of herself she would never have said that. But her mind

was not proof against the terrible strain put upon it. It was only too clear that the doctor's suspicion was aroused by the abject terror and mental collapse of her husband. She repented the words the moment they were spoken.

‘ My mixture !’ he exclaimed, turning his eyes sharply upon her.

His quick glance, following a movement of her hand, fell on the bottle that stood by the lamp with a wine glass beside it. There was a milky sediment at the bottom of both ; if any colour had been precipitated from the mixture he gave it should have been pink.

‘ Yes, your mixture, doctor,’ she said, putting her elbow on the table and trying to fix his eye with hers.

He saw what she was about to do : she intended by a backward movement of her arm to sweep bottle and glass from the

table as if by accident. Without a moment's hesitation he put out his hand and took the bottle.

‘ You have been tampering with this,’ he said, putting the bottle to his nose.

‘ What do you mean, Dr. Shaw?’ she asked, rising with an air of indignation.

‘ I mean what I say. You have been tampering with the mixture I gave. This bottle contained nothing but peppermint and water this morning. There is chloral in it now, and in this also,’ he added, taking up the glass. ‘ Are you aware that in certain circumstances it is felony to administer a drug of this kind ?’

‘ How do you know it has been administered ?’

‘ By this bottle and your own admission. Mr. Redmond,’ he said, turning round sharply, ‘ I address myself to you. I must see the young lady at once : where is she ?’

Redmond was standing as if petrified, with his livid face towards the half-opened door. The doctor's address made not the slightest impression on him. Glancing at Mrs. Redmond, he found her face also blank with some unaccountable dismay. What was the matter with them both, he asked himself. There was a sound outside beyond the hall at the foot of the tower ; that was what riveted them. Was it all over ? Had Nessa fallen without a cry ? Or was this indefinable sound but preparatory to those that must proclaim their crime intelligibly—the fall of *débris* caused by a movement above, to be followed by the crash and ringing scream they had been waiting to hear with such long horror ?

The doctor, who had fastened his cob by the rein to a loose ring in the gatehouse, might have heard the movement, but certainly he could not have imagined that the speechless

consternation of this man and woman was due to such a trifle. Their attitude was inexplicable to him. One thing, however, was clear ; he must look after the poor girl that Mrs. Redmond in perverse stupidity had been dosing. He made a movement towards the door.

Dread of discovery brought Redmond in a moment to his senses.

‘Where are you going?’ he asked with the energy of desperation.

‘I am going to find the young lady your wife has drugged.’

‘You cannot see her. I forbid you to go to her.’

‘But I insist upon seeing her. Do you know that a dose of this stuff is enough to paralyze a feeble heart and cause death?’

He would have passed by, but Redmond clutched his arm and held him back, crying incoherently :

‘ You shall not go up. This is my house. I forbid you. I’m a dangerous man. I’ll kill you ; by heaven, I’ll kill you, if you attempt it !’

The doctor looked at him keenly. It was clear enough he meant what he said ; there was murder in his eyes, and he was a powerful man.

‘ Very good,’ said he, disengaging his arm. ‘ I shall not put your threat to the test. I have done all that professional duty requires, but I warn you that if anything happens to that young lady, you will have to answer for neglecting my warning ; and you,’ he added, turning to Mrs. Redmond, and showing the bottle he held in his hand, ‘ for this !’

He passed alone through the hall and out through the door under the gatehouse. But he turned his back on the place with an uneasy conscience—an assertive conviction

that something more than professional duty called for his interference in behalf of Nessa. He felt that he was a coward to leave her thus at the mercy of the man and woman whose murderous character was stamped upon their faces. Turning in his saddle as his horse walked noiselessly over the grass-grown drive, he saw the house standing in a sombre mass, the towers and gables sharply defined against the light of the moon rising beyond. His flesh crept with the suspicion, almost amounting to certainty, that at this very moment that young girl, whose vivacity and brightness had charmed him in the morning, was being murdered. And just then a faint sound reached his ear ; it might have been a night bird's cry or the muffled shriek for help of a girl's voice. He stopped his horse involuntarily and listened. The cry was not repeated, not the rustling of a leaf broke the dead silence ; but he thought he descried a man's

figure crossing the dark lawn stealthily towards him. Craven fear shook him.

‘It was fancy,’ he said to himself, and digging his heels into the cob’s side he escaped.

## CHAPTER VIII.

BUT it was not fancy ; the long-expected sound had come—a despairing cry, an audible fall within the empty tower. Prepared as they were, Redmond and his wife heard it with a convulsive start and a sudden check in their breathing ; their eyes met in a glance of mutual intelligence. But a minute before they had heard the doctor unfastening the rein of his horse ; he might be now within hearing. If he were there he must be silenced to save them from conviction by his evidence. Spurred to desperation by the sense of danger, Redmond needed no prompting from his wife. He slipped into the hall, and taking down his

gun from the rack, made his way rapidly to the front of the house. The doctor had pulled up, and stood out clear enough beyond the shadow of the building. He was within range, but Redmond hesitated to fire, doubting if he could kill at that distance. Clearly he had heard the cry ; it would be fatal to let him escape with a wound. Redmond made a couple of quick cautious steps forward, trusting to the deep shadow of the house to avoid discovery. Suddenly the horse started, and the next minute the doctor was lost to sight in the darkness of the avenue. What was to be done now ? Two things were obvious : the doctor had heard Nessa's cry, and seen him. It was hardly less certain that he had gone off at a gallop to raise the alarm and procure assistance.

To go back to the house, and be taken there like a rat in a trap, Redmond looked upon as madness. With speed he might get to

Knaresboro' in time to catch the last train ; that would enable him to get on to Liverpool, where the morning papers would tell him whether the murder had been discovered. From Liverpool he could get away in the first outward-bound vessel, and save his neck. Without another thought, he threw down his gun and bolted.

Meanwhile, what had happened to Nessa ? A strange singing and throbbing in her ears accompanied the first return of consciousness, and with that a bewildering inability to remember anything, and to realize her present position. It seemed to her that she was revolving with prodigious velocity in some piece of machinery ; that in some way accounted for the lines and flashes of coloured light that passed before her eyes, the feeling of sickness and giddiness, the burning and throbbing in her ears, the confusion of ideas,

and the incapacity to distinguish any object save patches and streaks of colour.

Gradually the whirling sensation slackened. The light took the form of globes floating upward, and faded away, leaving her in complete darkness as the motion came to an end and the feeling of giddiness passed off.

Then she became conscious that her eyes were closed, and that a sharp projection was pressing the back of her head. With the effort to open her eyes and move her head, a new phenomenon became evident ; her will was powerless to influence a muscle of her body. She strove in vain to raise her hand, to stir her foot. It was as if she had been plunged into a bath of liquid plaster and it had hardened.

And now reviving recollection of the past suggested the idea that the opiate she took had thrown her into a trance, and she had been buried as dead. Her reasoning faculty

was sufficiently awake to explain the inability to move by the equal pressure on her muscles of the surrounding earth. In imagination she felt the cold wet clay pressing upon her ; the wonder to her was that she felt no suffocation, and breathed freely. But the sense of impotency was horrible. The futile endeavour to remove her head from the projection was maddening. She knew that she must lose her reason if this continued—like those martyrs she had read about, who died raving mad from the continued dropping of water upon their lips. Had she known that sure death would have resulted from a movement, she would have moved to overcome that awful cramp that seemed to frenzy every tissue and fibre of her body. Yet she knew that the cramp was imaginary, and that relief from this purgatory was to be obtained by reason and calmness. But reason only added to her horror.

She argued that if she could breathe she could surely cry out, and so, perhaps, make it known that she was there buried alive. She tried with every effort of her will to scream, and her breath escaped from her lips with scarcely an audible sound. Why was this? She felt the sweat trickling down her cheek ; that could not be if her face were covered : and if her mouth was not imbedded in clay, why should her voice fail to produce a sound ?

She lay there exhausted with her effort, on the border of insanity, her power of reasoning dissipated in a delirious tumult of recollections and fancies ; and then, in frantic desperation, she strove again to open her eyes. The lid rose feebly, the ball of the eye rolled down, and she saw—what? a spark of light.

She kept her eye fixed with the strenuous energy of despair, too overjoyed at the victory

she had won to care or think what the gold spark was that she saw.

After awhile she determined that it must be a star in the heavens, and that the black silhouette standing out against the lighter background must be foliage. She strained her eyes, and reasoned until she came to perceive that the foliage was ivy, and that she must be lying in the open air. But where, where ?

By another fierce effort she moved one foot. It slipped from its resting-place on the sill, and fell down till it struck heavily against one of the rotten joists. It was all a mystery to her ; but it was with ecstasy of delight she found that her limbs were free, and that she was recovering the use of her will — was not buried there ! Next she concentrated her energy into a movement of the hand, on the same side as the foot which she had released. That fell too, her arm

dropping as if it were lead. Her strength was just sufficient to enable her to pass her fingers feebly along the bricks against which it rested. She felt that there was damp moss there.

Suddenly there came into her mind something like an approximation to the truth. By some means she had come in her sleep to lie down there, and it seemed to her that this must be the parapet that she had observed running under her window. With that conviction came a consciousness of her perilous position, and she concluded that her foot and arm must be hanging over the side of the parapet.

Great God ! what mercy had been shown to her ! But for this paralysis that bound her limbs she would have fallen into the courtyard and been crushed to death. If she had awoke in the ordinary way, and sprung up, nothing in the world could have saved her.

Now all her endeavour was to draw back her arm and foot. Under the continued strain her muscles were awakening to their duty. She lifted her hand up with comparatively little difficulty ; but her foot was still numb and weak. Summoning all her faculties to the effort, she pushed with the lower foot to get herself further from the treacherous edge. She thought she was succeeding as her leg straightened out ; but a crumbling, grating sound proved soon enough that it was the support that moved—not she. With a sudden crash, it slid away and fell, grinding against the wall, down, till it struck the bottom far below with a dull smash.

As her foot fell, it seemed to her that the weight must drag her down, and terror gave sound to her voice. She screamed aloud, at the same time straining to maintain that rigidity which she had previously striven to

overcome. She knew that she owed her escape to this. It was obvious that she lay upon a narrow and treacherous ledge between two blocks of masonry, and that while she could keep tightly wedged there, and perfectly still, she was safe. All depended upon her holding her foot firmly against one side and her shoulders against the other.

But dread, that gave her strength at first, robbed her of it presently, as she thought of what must happen if she gave way. Her heart fluttered with the recollection of that dull, sickening crash she had heard, and might hear again when she fell. Her knee gave way, and trembled under the forced tension. She dared not cry for help ; yet how could help come if she did not make her position known ?

A cold faintness, the beginning of unconsciousness, crept upon her as she lay there panting, with wild terrors whirling through

her brain and sapping her self-control. Oh, nothing could save her! That thought brought again a faint, despairing cry from her quivering lips.

What was that? A footstep near her? A sound like a bolt being drawn in its rusty holdfast?

‘Oh, God, give me strength for another moment!’ she prayed.

And then, as the door swung back, she rolled heavily over at Mrs. Redmond’s feet, and lay there so still that the woman believed her dead—killed by fright.

## CHAPTER IX.

MRS. REDMOND had followed her husband to the door, and from the threshold seen the doctor disappear in the distance, and Redmond, after a moment of indecision, drop his gun, and make hastily for the path that cut through the wood. Had it been his intention by taking the short path to intercept the doctor and kill him in the road, he would not have left his gun behind. No; she knew the man's character too well to doubt that his only object was to save himself, leaving her to face the consequences of discovery.

Cursing him, and herself for having trusted such a treacherous and cowardly ally, she

returned mechanically to her room, with the perception that she also must fly. The doctor's evidence and her husband's flight must damn her inevitably. It was useless now to repent the course she had taken ; she must pack, and save herself while Nessa's fate was yet unknown.

At her door she stopped with a gasp of joy, hearing Nessa's second cry. It came from above, she was sure. Snatching the light from her table, she flew to the rescue. And surely had she been a good woman she could not have been more fervently grateful when she discovered that the girl had escaped destruction.

With eager haste she sought restoratives ; and when at length Nessa opened her eyes, she caught her in her arms and kissed her with genuine emotion—but an emotion which sprang from purely selfish considerations.

‘ My dear, *dear* Nessa—alive and safe—

you sweet, sweet girl!' she exclaimed, between her kisses.

'Where am I?' asked Nessa, bewildered by these caresses, by the dim perceptions of awaking consciousness.

'Where are you?' echoed Mrs. Redmond fiercely. 'Look!'

And raising the candle from the floor, she held it in the doorway over the black pit, where it flared and fluttered in the current of air.

Nessa, resting against Mrs. Redmond's breast as she knelt beside her, looked round in wonder—at the floor, the walls, the ceiling, the open door, and the black void beyond; then, suddenly recollecting past events, she shrank closer to Mrs. Redmond with a cry of horror, and looked aghast at the opening beyond the sill.

The next moment she burst out laughing, and by an imperceptible transition fell to

crying and sobbing, until, exhausted with the outburst of emotion, her head dropped back on Mrs. Redmond's arm, her eyelids drooped heavily, and her breath faded away in a long, fluttering sigh. Either she had fainted again, or was falling asleep.

‘Wake! wake, dear Nessa! for mercy's sake, wake!’ cried Mrs. Redmond in a new agony of fear, as she remembered what Dr. Shaw had said about the possible action of chloral.

No mother over her child could have shown more earnest solicitude.

When she succeeded in rousing the girl to a state of semi-consciousness, she tried what fright would do to overcome her lethargy.

Taking the candlestick, she held it again in the dark shaft of the tower, and purposely let it fall from her hands. The light went out instantly, leaving them in complete dark-

ness, and a hollow ring, like the fall of a stone in a deep well, came up as the metal candlestick struck the bottom.

‘That is what you have escaped,’ she said.

The poor girl moaned in horror, pressing her hands upon the floor, as if to save herself.

‘Help me! save me!’ she murmured.

‘You must save yourself,’ said Mrs. Redmond, retreating from the open door, herself terrified by the darkness.

Nessa caught at the skirt that touched her, and, springing to her feet, clung convulsively to the woman’s arm, as she made her way rapidly along the passage and down the stairs.

In the hall, faintly lit by the light from the sitting-room, Mrs. Redmond pointed to the open door.

‘He went out there. I saw him. He may

come back to finish the work he began. We must shut the door,' she said.

Her dramatic tone and gestures, her pallid face and disordered hair, were well calculated to stimulate Nessa's alarm and overcome the effects of the narcotic. Indeed, the girl, who had never before known fear, was now wrought to such a pitch of nervous excitement that her trembling fingers were powerless to push home the bolts when the great door was slammed to.

‘We are safe for the present,’ said Mrs. Redmond, turning the key. ‘Now come in here. There, sit down and be calm; we have no time to lose. We must settle what we are to do at once. He’s not likely to half do his murderous work if he gets another chance to murder you.’

‘Murder me! Who would do that?’ asked Nessa, with a piteous quaver in her voice.

‘Who?—my husband! Who else would?’

‘ Why should he ?’

‘ To save himself from ruin. He must go to the workhouse or the gaol if you live. A man would kill himself to avoid that fate : do you think he would hesitate to take the life of a girl instead, if he found a safe opportunity ?’

It seemed to Nessa impossible—incredible. She had read of such things, but she could not realize that she had been destined to such a fate.

‘ Don’t you believe me ?’ asked Mrs. Redmond, with sharp impatience.

‘ It all seems so strange,’ faltered Nessa.

‘ He came into my room, and asked about you. I told him what happened to you last night—like a fool. I repented it the moment he left me, for I know what he is. I was uneasy about it, and, after lying awake an hour, I slipped on my clothes, and came down here to see if it were true that he had letters

to write, as he told me. The lamp was here, where it stands now, but there was no sign of his having written letters, and he was gone. While I stood over there in the shadow, he passed on tip-toe through the hall, and went out by the door as white as a ghost. Then I knew he had been doing wrong, and I went up to your room. You were gone, but just outside your door—towards the door in the tower—your shoe lay on the ground. At that moment I heard your cry. As you know, I found the door bolted upon you. Now, have you any doubt ?'

Nessa shook her head.

‘ He had not the courage to murder you outright ; but he put you where you could not move without destroying yourself. He went away that he might not hear your cry, intending to come back and open the door when all was over, that it might appear you had opened it and passed through in your

sleep. I told him of our visit to Dr. Shaw yesterday ; that would have supported the conclusion, and freed him from suspicion. He'll come back presently, when he thinks the thing is done. If you want any further proof, you can open the front door, and watch him from here go up those stairs to the passage again.'

She rose as she spoke. Nessa caught her arm and held her, glancing at the window, almost expecting to see a white, sinister face looking through at her.

'No, no!' she faintly articulated under her breath ; 'don't—don't open it!'

'Not I! He'd kill me to hide his crime—kill us both to save himself. Why shouldn't he shoot us through that window? He took his gun. Who is to save us? What is there to prevent him?'

Nessa snatched at the blind and pulled it down. Mrs. Redmond, whose dread was

not all simulated, moved the lamp that their shadows might not betray them on the window.

‘What shall we do?’ asked Nessa. ‘What can we do?’

‘That’s it—what can we do? Two women against a fiend like that?’

‘Where is the gardener?’

‘He sleeps in the outbuildings—over the stables, and he’s deaf. I dare not cross the courtyard. Will you?’

Nessa shook her head and sank into a chair, her trembling limbs failing her.

‘One can’t expect much from you,’ said Mrs. Redmond. ‘You look half dead—and no wonder! If the girl were in the house,’ she continued in a tone of reflection, ‘we might send her; but she sleeps out there. Perhaps by calling from a back window we might make her hear; but it’s scarcely worth the risk of exposing one’s self. If the chaise

were out I should not like to go down that avenue in the dark.'

'Are you going away?' Nessa faltered.

'I should think so! Why, you don't suppose I'd stop another day—to say nothing of another night—in this ghastly place with a murderer? My life's as much in danger as yours now.'

'You won't leave me here?'

'It isn't likely. Do you think I'm as bad as my husband?'

'Oh, forgive me! I don't know what I say; I am quite unnerved. It was wicked to think you would abandon me—you to whom I owe my life!'

'That's all right: don't cry. We've got to think. As soon as it's light we'll wake the servants and get the trap out. We shall be safe enough then. Once outside this awful place, I shall feel safe. But what am I to do with you? You can't go back to

the school. He would find you there. You'll never be safe where he can lay hands on you.'

‘Where are you going?’

‘Oh, I shall go to London.’

‘Will you let me go there too?’

‘What money have you?’

‘None. But I could earn my living there, surely?’

‘That's all you know about it. Who would employ you without a reference? Why, no one would take you as a servant without a character.’

‘But if I explained how it was I came to need a situation——’

‘If you came to me with such a story, I should say, “This good-looking young woman has done something foolish, and run away from her friends to escape the consequences.” I should ask for the name and address of your wicked step-father, and tell you to call again

to-morrow. Then I should telegraph to him, under the impression that I was doing you a kindness in restoring you to your family ; and when you called on me for a reply, you would be met by Mr. Redmond, who would at once whisk you off to Grahame Towers. Why, you poor, simple child, you would find yourself alone in this house with your worst enemy, and at his mercy, in less than twenty-four hours from the time you escaped. It isn't a day, or a week, or a month that you must keep out of his reach ; you must keep out of his reach for three long years if you value your life. And you may reckon on this—every day of those three long years will be employed by him in getting you back—back into the grave you have slipped out of.'

‘What shall I do?’ murmured Nessa in despair.

‘Three years,’ said Mrs. Redmond, turning

her back on Nessa, and speaking in a slow, meditative tone, that encouraged the anxious girl to hope—‘three years: it sounds a long while, but three years soon pass. At the end of three years, we could snap our fingers at him?’ She stood silent a moment, keeping the girl in feverish uncertainty of hope and fear, and then, turning abruptly on her, she said: ‘Nessa, if I give you three years of my life; if I abandon house, home, position—all that a woman values; if I jeopardize my own existence to preserve you from such a fate as this you have escaped from—perils that must beset you till your fortune is beyond the reach of that wretch—may I depend on your gratitude afterwards?’

‘Oh, if you knew me!’ exclaimed the girl, clasping her hands, unable to find words for her feelings.

‘But I don’t know you. I know nothing about you. You look as if you were to be

trusted, but when the danger is past, will you feel as you feel now ?'

' If you never do anything more for me than you have done to-night, I must yet be always—always grateful.'

' And will you be obedient to my direction ?'

' Oh yes—yes—yes ! in all things.'

' I will believe you. You shall go to London with me ; you shall share all I have. I will save you.'

' And you shall share all I have—when I have anything to share.'

' That is fair. For without me you would surely have nothing. It is a bargain between us, Nessa !'

' A bargain—oh no, no ! If I gave you all I must still owe you my life. Oh, I never can repay all.'

' We shall see,' said Mrs. Redmond, moving towards the door. ' Come up with me. We

must pack what we have to take with us. As soon as it is light we will go.'

Her manner chilled Nessa for a moment, but no longer. The girl's heart warmed quickly in the rush of generous sentiment that sprang from her soul.

Darting forward, she threw her arms about the woman, and pressing her burning lips upon the soft, pallid face, she murmured her love and gratitude in foolish, broken sentences.

' You are a little goose!' said Mrs. Redmond, patting her shoulder playfully. ' A little goose,' she added to herself, ' that shall yield me many a golden egg.'

And recalling the fable, she blessed her stars that she had not succeeded in killing her goose.

## CHAPTER X.

‘No one has received so many rewards and commendations from her Majesty’s judges, magistrates, and bankers as F. Griffiths !’ He has said so himself, and his statement has appeared daily in the newspapers without being disputed by any other private detective.

F. Griffiths was seated in his highly-respectable office on the second floor of No. —, Dean’s Yard, Westminster, writing a letter with the laborious care of an inspector making out his charge-sheet, when the door opened, and a gentleman entered, with a certain reluctance that characterizes the person

who seeks help for the first time at a private inquiry agency.

Mr. Griffiths rose to his feet, and stood bolt upright behind his desk with his hands by his side, as if to the call of attention at a general inspection. He was a square man, with a military cut of hair and whiskers, a trace of the policeman in the redness of his neck, and a suggestion of the lawyer in the twinkling depths of his eyes. He looked capable and honest, and the visitor, favourably impressed by his appearance, closed the door and cut off his retreat.

‘Mr. Griffiths,’ he said, with a little difficulty over the *Mr.* that showed he was a foreigner.

‘Yes, sir: that’s me. Take a seat, sir.’

Griffiths made one step forward, and placed a chair; one step backward, and seated himself.

His visitor was a tall, elderly, gray-haired

gentleman, with a shaven face, a fair skin, and blue eyes, dressed with particular neatness in a well-fitting travelling suit of gray. Griffiths would have taken him for an Englishman but for his pronunciation — a gentleman in easy circumstances from the country, possibly in the medical profession.

‘ My name is Petersen. I live in Copenhagen, and I am in great trouble,’ said the gentleman, giving his card with an audible sigh.

‘ People generally are in trouble when they come to see me,’ said Griffiths cheerfully. ‘ It’s my business to get ’em out of it.’

‘ You have a great deal of experience.’

‘ Experience ! Why, if I could show you all the cases I’ve got in this book, sir,’ laying his hand on a thick folio with a locked clasp before him, ‘ you’d be surprised. There’s no sort of trouble that ain’t got its history here.

A general practitioner doesn't get a greater variety of cases to deal with than I have ; and though I don't pretend to do impossibilities, I may say there's scarcely anything in the private inquiry line that I find it impossible to do. Now, I dare say it's something in that way you want me to do for you, sir ?

‘ Yes ; it is that. I will tell you all.’

‘ That's right, sir. Don't be afraid of giving me too many particulars. Look upon me as a kind of doctor, who must know all about his patient before he can do him good.’

‘ That is so,’ Petersen said, gaining confidence. ‘ I am a widower, and I have one daughter and one son—one son, Eric. He is very dear to me, for he is a good son in all things. He is twenty-one ; and we three have been travelling through Europe since the spring, because my son has come to manhood, and it is well he should see something of the world and people. It was the

dearest wish of his heart and of mine that we should make this journey together.'

'See a bit of life, like. Yes, sir.'

'We have been staying in London two weeks—it is the end of our journey; and to-morrow we were to go back to our own country. I was glad, for my son has been unlike himself since he came here, and I could see he had some trouble in his heart that he dared not tell me. He has left us often to go out alone, and when with us his thoughts have been away from us.'

'Altogether he's been carrying on sort of mysterious?'

'Yes; he has carried on so. This morning, when I said to him, not without fear in my heart, "This is the last day of our holiday, Eric. To-morrow we go home," his face became quite white, and coming to my side, he took hold of my hand, trembling very much, and said, "Father, you must leave me

here. I cannot go home ;" and then he told us what has made him so strange : he has fallen in love with an English girl. My son is no longer a child : I cannot make him go back with me ; yet, in many ways, he is so simple that I dare not leave him in this vast city alone.'

' You don't feel like settling down here yourself ?'

' I have my business. I must return very soon.'

' You don't see your way to taking the young female ?'

' I do not want my son to marry yet : he is too young. But that is nothing. If she is a good girl, and fit to be my son's wife, he shall marry her, even if she refuses to come to our country. But I must know that : I must be sure that she is good before I leave my poor boy——'

' Ah, now I'm getting into it. I see what

you want, sir : you want me to find out what sort of a character this young party is.'

' Yes : I must know that,' said the old gentleman emphatically. ' I must know if she is good or bad. If I can show my son that she is not good, then I think respect for himself—respect for his sister and me—will lead him to break away from this terrible infatuation.'

' Quite so, sir. You shall have a full and true account of her. All you have to do is just to tell me her name and address.'

Saying this, Griffiths fished out a notebook, and prepared to write in it with business-like alacrity.

' Unfortunately I do not know the name or the address,' said Mr. Petersen.

' Well, I suppose we can get the information from your son.'

' No. He knows no more about her than I

do, except that he has seen her more often, and settled in his mind that she must be good because she is beautiful. But a girl may be beautiful and yet not good.'

'I should think so ! But am I to understand, sir, that the young gentleman has fallen in love with the party to this extent without knowing her name or where she lives ?'

'It is so. He has never spoken to her.'

In order to conceal his astonishment, Griffiths had to bear in mind that this old gentleman and his son were 'Germans or something,' and that to people of that kind nothing in the way of sentiment is too extravagant.

'You have seen her, I suppose, sir ?' he asked.

'Yes. We sat beside her at a theatre. I noticed her when we rose to go. She dropped her fan, and my son picked it up. She smiled

on him. That is the only time I have seen her.'

' What part of the house were you in ?'

' The stalls.'

' Which row ?'

' The third from the front, I think.'

' Was she alone ?'

' No, she was with a woman: a woman old enough to be her mother. I noticed her, too, because she looked at me as no lady would look at a man with white hair.'

' I understand, sir. That's what makes you uneasy—seeing this young female in the society of the unpleasant party.'

' Yes ; it must be that. I did not see anything in the girl that I disliked.'

' Were the stalls well filled ?'

' Yes ; I did not see one empty seat.'

' Then they paid for their seats. Orders would have gone in the back row. That shows they must be pretty well off.'

‘I have no doubt about that. They were dressed magnificently. Besides, they have a carriage, and ride fine horses.’

‘How did you learn that, sir?’

‘My son has seen them in the park since that night.’

‘When?’

‘Many times—in the afternoon.’

Griffiths started to his feet.

‘Come along with me, sir,’ said he. ‘We may be there in time to catch sight of ‘em to-day. Only just point out the female, and I’ll undertake to find out her name and address and all the rest before the week’s out.’

The cab that had brought Mr. Petersen to Dean’s Yard was standing outside the door.

‘That cab won’t do,’ said Griffiths, at a glance. ‘The horse is no good, and the man’s a fool. Pay him, sir. Where did you come from?’

‘ Charing Cross Hotel.’

‘ Shilling fare, sixpence waiting—give him two shillings.’

At the cab-rank he found a hansom to his taste—rubber tires, good horse, and a driver as spry as a terrier.

‘ I may want you to go sharp, and I may want you to go slow,’ said Griffiths in an impressive undertone to the driver as Mr. Petersen got in.

‘ Yussir,’ replied the driver, bending down attentively, with the perception that he had a good job in hand.

‘ When I shove the trap up sharp, go like blazes ; when I shove it up slow, slacken down till it closes, and keep up that pace. Don’t stop till I sing out. Understand ?’

‘ Yussir. Where to ?’

‘ Straight before you. Take your direction from my walking-stick, and keep a sharp look out for it. Understand ?’

‘ Right you are, sir. I’m fly.’

Following these directions, the cabman drove like the wind to Hyde Park Corner, and thence at a walking pace through the park to the Marble Arch. There he turned round, and returned the same way at a smart trot, turning at the corner and pulling up by the side walk within a hundred yards of the Piccadilly entrance.

They had passed scores of carriages, but up to this point Mr. Petersen had failed to detect the ladies they sought, though he had followed several with his eyes uneasily.

‘ Are you pretty certain you’ll know the parties if you see ’em ?’ asked Griffiths, observing the painful anxiety in the old gentleman’s face with misgivings.

‘ I have seen three or four women like the elder of the two, but none like the younger. There is not amongst them all one so beautiful.’

‘We’ve seen some clippers too. ’Pears to me, sir, there’s more riders than drivers to-day. Sort o’ day I should take to the saddle if I had the choice. We’ll have a look at the Row.’

He got out and nodded to the driver as a signal to wait; he also cast a glance at the constable on duty in the road, who, recognising him, acknowledged the glance by raising his hand in salute. In the Row he stationed himself with Mr. Petersen at the railings.

‘Who have you got your eye on, sir?’ he asked presently.

‘My son—my poor Eric. He is over there in the light suit like mine.’

A tall, well-built young man, with a fair face and a light moustache, was looking eagerly up the Row.

‘I should have took him for an Englishman—a young gent from college,’ Griffiths

soliloquized mentally. ‘He don’t look like a fool—anyways, not such a fool as to go mad about a female he’s never spoke to.’

‘I do not see them here,’ said Mr. Petersen despondingly.

‘P’raps not, sir, but they’re here. Don’t you see how the young gentleman keeps his eyes turned one way, and takes no notice of anybody passing before him? Keep your eye that way too, sir—never mind Mr. Eric.’

They waited five minutes; then Mr. Petersen, in hushed excitement, murmured :

‘Those two, I think. I am not sure. Yes, I think the graceful lady on the outer side is the one.’

‘I’m sure of it,’ said Griffiths emphatically. ‘Look at your son.’

The young man had drawn back from the rail, and his face, transfigured with an in-

effable joy, was gazing on the young girl passing before him.

Whilst the old gentleman turned his eyes with tender anxiety upon his son, Griffiths was taking in the two ladies in a penetrating, comprehensive glance. One was of a type that he recognised in a moment—a shapely woman of the world, with a very white nose, dark eyebrows, and a knot of loose, soft golden hair ; the other, a young girl, radiant with health and happiness, her white teeth gleaming through her parted lips, her large dark eyes sparkling with innocent enjoyment, was certainly not of the kind generally seen with such a companion. And though she sat her horse as if she had been used to the saddle from childhood, she had not the distinctive look of a girl long accustomed to exercise in the Row.

‘ She’d keep her lips shut, and look as if nothing was good enough for her if she was

used to this sort of thing,' thought Griffiths, and then he shot a glance at the groom that followed them.

'Come on, sir, I've got 'em!' he said exultantly.

'Do you know them?' asked Mr. Petersen.

'No, but I know their groom,' replied Griffiths, hurrying on towards the cab. 'They're hired horses, and the groom comes from livery stables I know of. However, I shall make sure, so be I can overtake them. I'll leave you here, sir.' He added, as he sprang into the cab and signalled the driver, 'Drop in on me to-morrow morning, sir.'

The next morning Mr. Petersen presented himself early at Dean's Yard.

'It's all right, sir,' said Griffiths. 'The elder lady calls herself Mrs. Merrivale—a widow.'

‘I noticed she wore some white inside her black bonnet when she left the theatre.’

‘Yes ; it goes with her yellow hair, black. But she ain’t a widow, and her name ain’t Merrivale. Her name’s Redmond, and she’s run away from her husband.’

‘And the young girl——’

‘Said to be her niece, but she ain’t that. Her name’s Grahame.’

‘Impostors both?’

‘Yes, sir. But you needn’t worry about your son. They’ll be up before the magistrate before a week’s out.’

‘They have done something wrong?’

‘I should think they had. Embezzlement : that’s what they’ll be had up for ; and they’ll go to prison for it, as sure as my name’s Griffiths !’

## CHAPTER XI.

‘You say they will be sent to prison for embezzlement,’ said Mr. Petersen reflectively —‘tell me the meaning of that word “embezzlement.”’

‘Getting goods under false pretences — that’s embezzlement, sir,’ replied the private inquiry agent.

‘And yet they keep horses and a carriage !’

‘Why, that’s just how they do it. Bless your heart, sir, they couldn’t get credit if they didn’t make a show. Not one of these West-End houses would trust me with goods for five pounds ; but a smart female, with nothing but a good stock of impudence, can let the whole lot of ’em in for hundreds easy.

And they do. The West-End tradesmen are constantly being done. A friend of mine, in the same line of business as myself, is employed regular by one of these firms to find out whether a new customer is a swindler or otherwise. I called on him last night, and he told me all about these two females. It appears his employers are going for 'em, cost what it may. It's throwing good money after bad, as you may say. They'll never get back a penny for the goods they've let go ; but, you see, they have to make a public example now and then to frighten some of the shaky ones into paying up.'

'Is that young girl guilty as well as the woman ?'

'Both in it, sir ; and, from information received, I should say the young girl was more in it than the other. It's she who's let 'em in and got credit all round.'

'What is this ? Do you tell me that

practical men of business would give large credit to a young girl like that?

‘I don’t think they would if they’d known it; but the parties took precious good care they shouldn’t. This is how they did it. The young lady has a lot of cards printed with her name, “Vanessa Grahame,” under a crest, and “Grahame Towers” over the London address in a corner. But auntie gives the cards, and orders the things to be sent home, and consequently leads ‘em to believe that she’s Vanessa Grahame. They worked another dodge of the same kind. It seems that they brought a pony-carriage to London with ‘em—very smart turn-out: handsome black cob and silver-plated harness. There was a monogram, “M. R.” on the panel of the trap, and the same on the harness—showing that it belonged to this Mrs. Merrivale, who formerly called herself Redmond. Well, the first thing they did

was to take off the monogram and stick Miss Grahame's crest in the place of it. Clever, wasn't it ?'

' It is dreadful to think of.'

' Why, so it is, sir — specially for the creditors. They've booked the things to Vanessa Grahame and can't get a penny out of her ; nor her people, if she's got any, seeing that she's a minor ; and silks and furs and champagne and horse-riding and a villa furnished up to the nines are not exactly necessities to a person in her circumstances. It appears,' continued Griffiths, consulting his note-book, ' that they came to London August the 21st — barely two months ago — and put up for a week at the Universe Hotel — there's cheek for you ! Then they went into this villa at St. John's Wood — " Dwale-Bleuth " is its name. The party they took this villa off is in the musical line, and she's gone to America with an operatic company.

There they've been going it like anything - living up to a couple of thousand a year, I should say, what with theatres every night, horse-riding, pony carriage, four servants, and high living.'

Mr. Petersen said something in his own language which was quite incomprehensible to Griffiths, but in his voice there was an unmistakable tone of regret.

'Don't you worry about your son, sir. There's evidence enough to convict both the females of swindling. I've jotted down a few more facts about 'em here.'

Griffiths referred with keen enjoyment to his note-book.

'No, I have heard enough,' said Mr. Petersen, turning in his chair.

'Well, I've done the best I could for you,' said Griffiths in an injured tone.

'Yes, you have done well.'

'I thought you didn't seem satisfied.'

‘No, I am not satisfied when I think of that young girl, as I have seen her, quite a young maid—not older than my own daughter—so beautiful, so lost.’

‘Well, you see, sir, I ain’t got any sympathy with people of that sort.’

‘Tell me, what will become of her?’ said the old gentleman sharply, facing about.

‘She’ll go to prison, and come out worse than before. She’ll play the same game on again. They always do; and she’ll get another term in prison, and come out more hardened than ever. And so she’ll go on.’

‘And what will become of her then?’

‘When she’s lost her good looks and her youth and all that—well, I’m blessed if I know what will become of her then’

‘And yet you have no sympathy for her while she is still young. My son loves her,’ Mr. Petersen added tenderly, as he turned again in his seat. ‘Perhaps I love her too.

Surely, there is something good in beautiful faces to win the love of innocent hearts.'

'Well, there's nothing more to be done, I suppose,' said Griffiths.

'Yes, there is,' replied Mr. Petersen, after a moment's reflection; 'find out more about Miss Grahame. All we know now is what you have learned from a man occupied in securing evidence to convict her of evil. I cannot believe that she is quite wicked, and I am sure that my son will not believe it.'

'Why, as you say, sir, it's only one man's opinion, and he's biased. There's one or two points in the case that I can't quite make out satisfactory, and it may be she'll turn out only a tool in this Mrs. Redmond's hands when the truth is known.'

'That is what I want—the truth. Nothing more.'

'Well, I'll have a go at it, sir, and learn all there is to be learnt,' said Griffiths with

renewed cheerfulness. ‘In the meanwhile, don’t say a word about this to your son.’

‘Heaven forbid I should do that wrong to Miss Grahame!’ said Mr. Petersen.

He left the office, promising to call the next day.

Griffiths sat for some time in consideration; then he put money in his pocket, and went out to buy the truth about Miss Grahame.

He did not get much for his money the first day; but the next evening he obtained a few facts from Miss Grahame’s coachman.

This young man had set down his mistress and Mrs. Merrivale in Piccadilly Circus, and was slowly working his way through the crowd of vehicles, when Griffiths coolly stepped up and took the box seat beside him.

‘Hullo, here—I say—what are you at?’ asked the young fellow.

‘All right—drive on. I’m going with you

just as far as Oxford Circus ; that's all. I want to know something about the ladies you have just set down, and I shall pay for the information.'

Argument, or even objection, was out of the question in the midst of the traffic, and by the time he had driven into the comparative calm of Regent Street, the coachman had come to the conclusion that he might just as well earn a shilling or two as not.

' Well, what do you want to know ? '

' Tell me what your ladies do from the first thing in the morning till the last thing at night. To begin with, what time do they come down in the morning ? '

' Mrs. Merrivale comes down all manner of times, but Miss Grahame is mostly down by nine to breakfast. She's always dressed and ready to go out for her riding lesson when the gentleman from the Riding School comes at ten with the horses.'

‘Oh ; she goes out every morning for a riding lesson !’

‘Never misses a day ’cept Sundays. Never see such a young lady for riding.’

‘Well, when she’s had her lesson ?’

‘She comes home. They have lunch at one, and after that they goes out again for a ride, the two of ’em, or else driving in the carriage.’

‘Where do they drive ?’

‘All manner of places ; picture shows, shopping : but mostly they have a turn through the Park. Every night it’s a theatre or a concert.’

‘Or a music-hall ?’

‘Music-hall !’ echoed the young man, with disgust and indignation. ‘Do I look as if I drives ladies to music-halls ?’

‘Sometimes they go to visit friends ?’

‘No, they don’t.’

‘Well, anyhow, they stop to speak to acquaintances ?’

‘They haven’t got any acquaintances.’

‘But surely they receive visits from someone. A friend drops in now and then?’

‘No, they don’t. No one drops in.’

‘Not even bill collectors?’

‘You don’t call them friends, I hope. We don’t, and we send ’em round to the servants’ door if they don’t know their place. Don’t you run away with any foolish error. We’re as respectable as if we lived in Russell Square.’

‘P’raps you’ve not been there long enough to know any better.’

‘I’ve been with them ever since they came to live in London. Now you’ve got your answer, and you can get down as sharp as you like.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Why, you know well enough. You’ve been hinting that my people ain’t of no account, and that’s just as much as to tell me to my face that I haven’t got any character

to lose. I know you, and I don't want your money. If you can't get off my box without assistance, I'll call a policeman to help you.'

Griffiths was not displeased with the young man's virtuous indignation. It was clear that the ladies were living respectably. But where did they get the money to go to theatres and places where admission is not to be got on credit, if it were an actual fact that they were driven to the dangerous extremity of getting goods under false pretences ?

He took a cab to the Universe Hotel, sent in his business card, and was presently shown into the manager's room.

‘ You have had two ladies staying in this hotel ; one calling herself Mrs. Merrivale, the other Miss Grahame,’ he began.

The manager assented with a nod, and said they had stayed a week in August.

‘ I am instructed by friends of Miss Grahame

to make inquiries respecting certain debts incurred by that young lady.'

' I have already answered inquiries on that subject.'

' Yes ; but I have called to corroborate the information given to my friend Peel.'

' Well, I can only tell you what I told him — Miss Grahame owes us nothing.'

' Did she pay in cash or by cheque ?'

' Cheque.'

' You have no doubt about the cheque being genuine !'

' None at all. I can prove that at once, to your satisfaction.'

He opened a drawer in his desk and produced his pass-book and paying-in-book, which showed that a cheque for one hundred pounds, and which he remembered was payable to Vanessa Grahame, had been sent to the bank, and had been duly honoured.

But the chief fact for Griffiths was that the

cheque, as stated in the paying-in-book, was drawn by Hyam Nichols. The name was well known to him : Nichols was a professional money-lender. It was dated the same day that they left the Universe. It looked as if they had been staying there only till they got the money to pay their bill. But it puzzled Griffiths to imagine how they had got the money out of Nichols ; he was the last man in the world to be taken in by pretences of any kind. It cost Mr. Griffiths two whole days and the best part of a five-pound note before he got within measurable distance of an explanation. He succeeded at length, however, in getting Mr. Benjamin Levy, a clerk to Mr. Hyam Nichols, into his office, and there brought him to a communicative spirit.

‘Mrs. Redmond came to us the very day she bolted from her husband,’ Mr. Levy explained. ‘She brought Miss Grahame with her. The young lady was dressed very

plainly, and looked particularly pale ; but there, I tell you, I was gone on her at first sight, and stammered, and stumbled over the mat, and went on just like a fool showing 'em into the governor's private office. And it is a good thing for you, Mr. Griffiths, I was gone on her, for I wouldn't have let down my governor for thousands if I hadn't been. What I'm doing ain't for your two quid : don't think it. I'm playing for Miss Grahame ; not myself.

‘ “ Read this, if you please, ” ’ says Mrs. Redmond, laying a paper on the table before the governor as soon as they were seated.’

‘ ‘ Stop a bit,’ said Griffiths, raising a finger, ‘ how did you find this out ?’

‘ Well, there’s a hole in the partition between the governor’s office and mine, just behind the deed-box.’

‘ ‘ Oh, I see. All right. Proceed.’

‘ He reads it—so did I afterwards. It was

a will, leaving an estate worth forty or fifty thousand pounds to Miss Grahame, to be hers when she's twenty-one, with a codicil placing her under the guardianship of James Redmond until she comes of age, and bequeathing the estate to him in the event of her dying a minor. Do you see ?'

Griffiths nodded.

' When the governor had read it, Mrs. Redmond says, "This is Miss Grahame : I am the wife of her guardian, James Redmond."

' The governor butters 'em up with a couple of compliments—he's a rare hand at that, you know—and she goes on : " I have given up my home and all I have in the world, and brought this unfortunate young lady to London in order to save her from being murdered by the most infamous scoundrel living—that scoundrel is my husband, James Redmond."

“ ‘Is it possible?’ says the governor, as if he’d never come across such a thing before.

“ ‘Miss Grahame herself will tell you that an attempt was made upon her life last night. Is not that true, Nessa?’ ”

“ ‘I should not have been alive now, but for you, dear,’ replies the poor young lady, taking Mrs. Redmond’s hand affectionately.

“ The governor was astounded, of course ; and then, having soaped ‘em down again, he says, ‘ And what do you propose to do?’ ”

“ ‘I intend,’ says Mrs. Redmond, “ to live in London and keep Miss Grahame under my protection until she is entitled to her estate and is no longer in danger of falling a victim to my husband’s machinations. But I am without means. I have nothing but the pony-carriage in which we made our escape from Grahame Towers and a few personal effects.’ ”

“ ‘Your husband has no legal claim upon

that property, of course ?" says the governor, getting on to business.

" 'None,' " says she ; " I have nothing that belongs to him—not even a name. That is a stain I will not bear. Henceforth I shall be known only by my maiden name—Merrivale."

" 'A very proper decision, Mrs. Merrivale,' " says the governor. " And now, I presume, you want me to give you temporary pecuniary assistance ?"

" 'Not for myself, but for Miss Grahame,' " says Mrs. Redmond. " She must live during the next three years in a manner suitable to the position she is to occupy when she comes of age. For that purpose I wish you to advance the sum of five thousand pounds on the security of that will."

' This was a large order, and the will, of course, was no security at all ; but the governor answered at once, as sweetly as if

she'd asked for a loan of half a crown on consols for a hundred quid, "There will be no difficulty in letting Miss Grahame have five thousand pounds on her promissory note, and if later on she would like to draw a bill for a few thousands more——"

"Mrs. Redmond was delighted. "Oh, thank you very much," says she. "When can we have the money?"

"You can have a couple of thousand to-morrow morning, if my legal adviser sees no objection to the security."

"Oh, you'll find that all right," says she. "You can see the will at Somerset House."

"That's exactly what the governor sent me to do as soon as I had shown 'em out. I got a copy of the will from Somerset House, and the governor did nothing all the rest of the day but look at it and stroke his beard. I was curious to know how the governor was going to work this job, for I

knew perfectly well he never intended to lend money without good security.

“Mrs. Merrivale came alone next day, and the governor was more soapy than ever.

“‘My legal adviser,’ says he, ‘has pointed out one fact that we have overlooked. If Miss Grahame should die before twenty-one, her promissory note is worth nothing, as the whole estate goes to Mr. Redmond. The probability is that Miss Grahame will not die while she enjoys your valuable protection ; but should it happen that she fell by some unfortunate accident into the hands of her guardian, the prospect of her attaining the age of twenty-one is—well, very small indeed. Nevertheless, I think we may overcome the difficulty by insuring the young lady’s life for the sum we wish to place at her disposal, and leaving the policy in my hands as security. I shall be happy to pay the expenses, and all that Miss Grahame need do is to submit to a

medical examination at a respectable insurance office, and sign a piece of paper."

‘ Well, of course, Mrs. Redmond agreed to that, and the same afternoon Miss Grahame passed an examination, and filled up a form of application to insure her life for five thousand pounds. The governor paid the premium, and got the policy the following week, and to do the thing handsome, handed Miss Grahame a cheque for a hundred pounds on the spot, promising the rest of the loan by the end of the week.

‘ You may lay your life he didn’t keep his promise. Mrs. Redmond had got enough to start with, and didn’t bother us for three or four days. When she did come the governor, of course, was out, and when she came again he was out—in fact, he’s always out, and she’s never seen him from the day he gave her the first cheque to this. Many a time when she was raging like a fury in the outer office

he was sitting inside stroking his beard and grinning, just like a cat cleaning its whiskers after chawing up a mouse.

‘But he wasn’t always in. He went down to Knaresboro’ for a few days’ fishing, and managed to scrape an acquaintance with Mr. James Redmond. He didn’t say anything to him then, but last week, when he heard that the police were watching Mrs. Redmond, and had found her out pawning some jewels she hadn’t paid for, he goes down to Knaresboro’ again, and tells Redmond that it’s his painful duty to inform him that his ward, Miss Grahame, is living in London with a woman of dangerous character. And now he and Redmond and the police are all working it together for their own ends. Do you see?’

‘No, I don’t quite,’ said Griffiths.

‘Well, I’ll just tell you what will happen to-morrow as sure as ever the sun rises. They will be taken into custody when they

go out of the house in the afternoon : that's what will happen to-morrow. The day after to-morrow they'll be brought before the magistrate, and be charged with fraud. Redmond's solicitor will step forward and affirm that Miss Grahame is a young lady of unsound mind, who ran away from school after playing a mad freak, and has taken refuge with Mrs. Merrivale—whom Redmond, of course, will never in all his life have seen before—and been an unwary tool in the hands of that unprincipled woman.

‘ Possibly Miss Grahame will be discharged ; if not, she will certainly be let off on bail, and in either case she will be snugly placed in the hands of that scoundrel Redmond. Mrs. Merrivale will be committed for trial without doubt. That's what will happen the day after to-morrow.

‘ What will follow in due course is just as certain. Mrs. Merrivale-Redmond will go

to gaol, Miss Grahame will die, and the governor will get five thousand pounds from the insurance company for the neatest job he has ever had the good fortune to fall in with.'

Late as the hour was when Griffiths parted from the amiable Mr. Levy, he went to the Charing Cross Hotel, and in a private interview with Mr. Petersen laid the whole case clearly before him.

## CHAPTER XII.

IT was striking ten as Eric Petersen left the Charing Cross Hotel and hailed a hansom, running towards the cab as he called to the driver.

‘St. John’s Wood,’ he said, putting an address in the man’s hand. ‘I will give you a sovereign if you drive quickly.’

His father and his sister had followed him quickly down the stairs. The cab was turning round and facing them as they came to the door. The girl, with love and hope in her face, waved her hand in encouragement ; the father also waved his hand, looking at his dear son through the tears that dimmed his

sight. Eric saw nothing but a vision of the girl he had to save from death.

There had been a thick fog in the streets all night—the first of the season ; it had lifted a little, and hung over the houses in a copper canopy, but it had left the roads greasy. It was maddening to sit behind the stumbling horse with the knowledge that the dearest life in the world might be lost by delay.

‘Roads very bad, sir, this morning,’ said the driver apologetically, through the trap. ‘We shall be all right soon’s we get off the stones.’

So it proved. The copper cloud became gray, the sun standing out sharp and flat like a red wafer ; and the horse spanked along the hard dry macadam, making up for lost time, leaving everything on wheels behind. At length the cab drew in towards the kerb, and pulled up sharp before a house that stood back from the road, screened by a

shrubbery and a couple of fir-trees. On the gate-post was the name of the house—Dwale-Bleuth.

As Eric stepped quickly from the cab, he cast an eager glance at the windows of the house visible above the shrubs. The face he sought was not there. Then he glanced to the right and left. Against a lamp-post at the corner of the street to the left a man looking like a labourer out of work leant, a pipe in the corner of his mouth, his hands in his breeches pockets ; against the wall hard by a mate leant ; he was intent on cleaning his pipe with a straw and never raised his eyes. The fellow against the post just shifted the shoulder on which he leant to look in dull curiosity at the cab. Without a doubt they were police in disguise waiting to arrest Mrs. Merrivale and Miss Grahame.

‘Thank Heaven I am not too late !’ said

Eric to himself, as he passed through the gate and approached the house.

While he stood at the door, one of the two men from the corner slouched past the open gate and cast an eye at him.

‘I wish to see Miss Grahame at once,’ said Eric as the door opened.

‘Miss Grahame’s not at home, sir,’ said the man-servant; ‘she went out about half an hour ago.’

Eric’s heart fell.

‘And Mrs. Merrivale?’

‘No, sir, she’s in. Miss Grahame went out with the riding-master alone.’

That explained the presence of the detectives. They had let the girl slip for fear of losing the greater culprit.

‘I think she’s gone in the Park for her lesson; she generally does,’ the young man added. ‘You might meet her if you went in by the Marlborough Road way.’

Eric ran down to the cab. One of the labourers was now standing by the kerb, about a yard ahead of the cab. The other had quitted the wall to grace the lamp-post. If Mrs. Merrivale had come out to the cab she would have stood but a poor chance of escape.

‘Marlborough Road,’ said Eric, as he stepped into the hansom, and then, lifting the trap when the cab had gone a hundred yards, he added, ‘I want to find a lady who has gone into the Park with a man to have a riding-lesson.’

‘Right you are, sir. I think I know the most likely place to look for ‘em.’

He turned into the Park. The sky grew brighter! Only a thin mist softened the distance. The young man’s heart grew brighter too, and his eyes sparkled with hope. Presently the trap was lifted.

‘There’s a lady and gentleman on ahead, sir, and there’s no groom,’ said the driver.

Eric had already discovered them.

‘Yes, that is she,’ he answered, trembling with emotion; ‘they are coming this way. Stop when she is near.’

They came on at a gentle canter. Before the cab stopped, Eric sprang out and stood in the road before them.

There was no one else within fifty yards. It was clear that he had business with them, and they reined in instinctively.

Eric, taking off his hat, stepped to Nessa’s side, and stood there for a moment hat in hand, looking up at her unable to speak. Nessa, sitting erect in the saddle, looked down on him in round-eyed astonishment at first, her face pale with the undefined misgiving that seized her; then her cheek flushed as she recognised the gentleman who had picked up her fan at the theatre, and whom she had seen more than once since in the Park following her with his eyes. Mrs.

Merrivale, whose comprehensive glance overlooked no one, had pointed him out several times to her, and joked her about her bashful admirer. It occurred to her that he was about to make himself openly ridiculous; that put her on her dignity at once.

‘Miss Grahame,’ Eric faltered, ‘you must pardon me. I have something to say to you which only you may hear.’

He glanced significantly at the riding-master, who was just ahead of Nessa.

‘Then you will have to find a more fitting opportunity,’ said Nessa, touching her mare with the whip.

‘You must hear me,’ said Eric, laying his hand on the rein in desperation as she moved.

‘Do you venture, sir——’ she began.

‘Oh, I will venture anything—even at the risk of your anger. Listen——’

She drew back indignantly as he pressed

towards her side ; but she heard the words he whispered under his breath :

‘ The police are waiting down there to seize you and give you into the hands of James Redmond.’

## CHAPTER XIII.

THE name of James Redmond had a magic effect upon Nessa, whose mind, despite its youthful elasticity, had never been able to throw off the dread and horror impressed upon it by the terrible events of the night at the Towers. This unknown friend's sincerity was marked in his face ; his warning was not to be disregarded. She drew in the rein vigorously, and the mare, who at the touch of her whip had started forward, freeing her bridle with a toss of the head from Eric's hand, now answered with a show of temper, rearing on her hind legs, and then backing with head down, quivering nostrils, and swishing tail. The riding-master, who

had kept stolidly aloof, watching the proceedings from the tail of his eye in readiness to meet an emergency, now, pressing to Nessa's side, asked, in a low tone, if she needed his assistance.

'Please leave me for a few minutes,' she said ; and then, turning to Eric, she bent down in her saddle, saying, in a voice tremulous with anxiety, 'I do not understand you. Tell me what you mean.'

Beautiful she looked with her lithe young figure bent thus, her paled cheek, her prettily curved lips parted in expectancy, her large dark eyes dilated like a frightened doe's—more beautiful than ever she had appeared to Eric. He gazed up in that wonderful face mute for a moment, and then her peril gave him the power to speak which adoration had taken from him.

'Your life is in danger,' he said. 'My father told me this morning, and sent me to

save you. You have insured your life. The wretch who holds the policy has betrayed you to James Redmond, that he may take you away and put you to death. They have no souls—no love. They will kill you to get money. It does not seem true, but it is true—believe me.'

'I do believe it. I have escaped once.'

'You may not escape again if you fall into that man's hands. Go to my father. See, that is his name, and that is where you will find him.' He put a card in her hand. 'My sister is with him. She loves you, and my father loves you also. To-night we go to our home in Copenhagen. If you will come with us, no one in the world shall take you away—not while I live.'

She listened in mute astonishment while he explained with fervid eagerness the danger of her position. At first it was all incredible to her; but the earnestness of this unknown

friend brought home to her a conviction that he was telling no more than the truth. Then wonder gave place to gratitude, and with that feeling warming her heart the girl's eyes twinkled, and her face became flushed with rich colour and melted into a smile. She was moved to something more than gratitude by this act of unsought friendship, by the devotion in the eyes of this honest, good-looking young fellow. She was won by his simplicity and earnestness, which gained by the foreign accent with which he spoke, and certain quaint, untranscribable idiomatic terms. 'If I were a man,' she thought, 'I would give him my hand, and show him how I feel this kindness.' He must have read that wish in her eyes, for he instinctively raised his hand as he said :

'Believe me, we are very true friends.'

'You have shown me that,' she said, and passing the card to her left hand she dropped her right into his.

‘Eric Petersen,’ she read.

‘Yes, that is my father’s name, and mine also. My sister’s name is Lina. You will go to them?’

‘Yes,’ she said, coming back to the gravity of her position. ‘It is a choice between life and death. But if the choice were not so serious as that,’ she added, with a gentler inflection, ‘I would not lose the pleasure of knowing Lina and your father.’ Then the practical difficulties and consequences occurred to her mind. ‘But my clothes—I cannot travel in this dress ; and I have no money.’

‘All that is nothing. Lina has many dresses, and my father has money, and everything will be arranged when we get to Copenhagen.’

‘And, oh ! I did not think of that. I am not alone. I have one friend whom I must not forget in thinking of myself.’

‘You will write from the hotel to Mrs.

Redmond,' Eric said, in an altered tone, and dropping his eyes for the first time.

‘I could telegraph, and she will come and see me. Perhaps she too will go to Copenhagen. That is,’ she added, as Eric kept his eyes down, and made no response, ‘if it is agreeable to your family.’

‘Mrs. Redmond will not leave London with us. I have been to the house.’

‘Ah, she told you she would not go. I remember she dreads the sea.’

‘No, it is not that,’ said Eric, after a brief silence. ‘I must tell you the truth. When Mrs. Redmond goes out of the house she will be taken to prison.’

‘Prison !’ Nessa exclaimed in terror.  
‘Taken to prison ! Why ?’

‘Because she is not a good woman.’

Nessa was silent a moment; then she said :

‘Oh, I am sorry you should say so. It is

so unjust—so cruelly untrue. She is the best friend I have in the world. She has saved my life, and she has given up everything for my sake. I might have starved in London alone. She has managed my affairs, and given me all that I have.'

Eric looked up at her in joy, wishing his father were there to hear this confirmation of the girl's simplicity and innocence.

'What wrong has she done?' Nessa asked angrily.

'She has given you what was not hers to give—bought many things in your name which you cannot hope to pay for.'

'Everything was for me, and every farthing shall be paid when the man who insured my life pays me what he promised.'

'He will never do that. He is plotting to get Mrs. Redmond sent to prison, and put you into the hands of the man who will destroy you.'

‘Then he has done the wrong, not my friend. Oh, you must see that she is not in fault.’

‘I may have done her an injustice.’

‘You *have* done her an injustice,’ Nessa said fiercely, ‘and you have wronged me too. Oh, how ill you must think of me—what an ungrateful coward I must seem—to believe that I would run away to be out of danger, and leave her to face alone the trouble she had brought upon herself for my sake ! But I am not a coward ; let them do their worst.’

Her nostrils dilated. She set her teeth and knitted her brows as she gathered up the rein that had slipped from her hand.

‘What are you going to do?’ Eric cried in entreaty, again putting his hand upon the rein.

‘I am going to my friend,’ she answered. ‘Please take your hand from the rein.’

‘ You can do no good.’

‘ I can try. I can tell the truth, and no one can convict my friend when the truth is known. I must call for help if you detain me.’

‘ One moment, I implore you. You are throwing your life away. It is not my opinion, but the assurance of the police themselves. You cannot save your friend.’ Then he added, after a pause, ‘ But I can. And I will, though you do not know how much it costs me.’

She had reason to remember those words later on with aching regret ; at the moment they only inspired hope. Again she held in her mare, and bent down to listen to his scarcely audible voice. He was speaking rather to himself than to her, as he hurriedly murmured :

‘ Surely it can be done. We shall find means. It is your life that has to be saved. That is what I have to think of.’

‘ You say you will save her?’ said Nessa.

‘ Yes, if you will save yourself.’

‘ What am I to do?’

‘ Go to some place of safety, and stay there until I bring your friend to you.’

‘ I will go to your father.’

‘ No,’ said Eric, shaking his head in sadness; ‘ you must not go to him now.’

Nessa’s mind was too occupied with the thought of her friend’s escape to see the significance of this prohibition.

‘ I could go to the riding-school in Finsbury,’ she suggested quickly.

‘ Yes, that is well. That gentleman will take care of you. Wait patiently. I will save your friend.’

‘ Oh, if you do, I will never forget you.’

‘ That is something,’ said Eric to himself as he turned away. ‘ She will never forget me.’

## CHAPTER XIV.

NESSA and the riding-master passed him rapidly as Eric reached the hansom. He followed her with his eyes, his heart aching with regret as he remembered the eager joy of watching for her coming day after day, and realized that henceforth he was never more to look for that dear face. By an effort of resolution he turned away that he might concentrate all his thought on the thing he had undertaken to do for her.

After a minute's reflection, he said to the cabman, putting a sovereign in his hand :

‘ That is for what you have done. Now, pay attention to what I say, and do as I

tell you, and I will give you twice as much.'

'Right you are, sir,' said the cabman, touching his hat, and bending down.

'First, drive back to the house where you set me down.'

'St. John's Wood, sir ?'

'Yes ; but go back a different way, with the horse's head towards Charing Cross.'

'I understand, sir.'

'I shall go into the house. But someone else will come out and get into the cab. You will be ready to start at any moment ; you will not wait for anything ; but the instant that person is in the cab, you will go.'

'Like a shot.'

'That is so. Two men are in front of the house.'

'I see 'em, sir. One passed the time of day to me ; but I never enter into no conver-

sation with any one when I've got a gentleman fare.'

'Good! Those men may try to stop you; but you must not let them.'

'I'll give 'em a doing if they try. Of course, sir, if they gets hold of the animal's head—'

'They won't do that; but they'll probably run after you, and call out to you to stop.'

'Well, they'll have to run like steam to catch me; and as for hollering, they'll screech themselves hoarse 'fore ever they'll make me hear. No fear, sir, as long as they're not hanging on to the horse.'

'When they are quite out of sight, you will open the trap, and take your direction from the person inside. When you have set down that person, you will take this card to the Charing Cross' Hotel. If I am not there, my father will give you your pay.'

He gave the card, on which he had written

a few words to his father while concluding his instructions, and sprang into the hansom. The driver started off at a speed that showed his determination to earn his pay.

The labourers were still waiting at the corner of the street. There were two gates to the drive that formed a semicircle before the house : the first stood open. Eric entered by the next, which he flung back in passing. The cab drew up before that one, as being the furthest removed from the corner of the street.

Eric sent his card to Mrs. Redmond, with the words 'on a matter of importance' written under his name. He was shown into a sitting-room. Mrs. Redmond came down in a couple of minutes, with the card in her hand and a look of surprise on her face, which was not lessened when she recognised her visitor.

In a few words Eric laid the whole case before her, dwelling only on Nessa's generous

refusal to save herself while her friend was in danger. That seemed to interest Mrs. Redmond far less than the question of her own escape.

‘ You say those wretches are waiting outside to take me. How am I to get away ? ’ she asked, shaking with fear.

‘ Will you follow my direction ? ’

‘ Certainly.’

‘ You have a carriage ? ’

‘ Yes.’

‘ Can you depend on the driver ? ’

‘ If it’s to his interest.’

‘ I will make it to his interest. Have you any female servant you can trust to help us ? ’

‘ You can trust any one if you make it worth her while to help you.’

‘ Do you know if there is one more anxious than the rest to get money ? ’

Mrs. Redmond reflected a moment, and

decided that the housemaid was the greediest of gain.

‘Let her dress at once in your clothes—the best you have—the things you would wear if you were going to get things at shops. Let her wear a thick veil that cannot be seen through, and fasten it so that it cannot be raised easily.’

‘I’ll sew it.’

‘Do not forget to let her wear gloves.’

‘She shall keep her hands in my muff if she can’t get my gloves on.’

‘At the same time you will dress yourself for going out, as simply as possible, not to attract attention. Conceal your hair if you can.’

‘Yes, yes—I can do that.’

‘Let another servant pack a valise with a complete change of clothes for Miss Grahame. Hat, gloves—do not forget anything. Her safety——’

‘ All right ; all right,’ interrupted Mrs. Redmond impatiently. ‘ And when we’re dressed as you suggest, what then ?’

‘ Where is your coachman ?’

‘ Downstairs.’

‘ How long shall you be packing the valise and dressing ?’

‘ Twenty minutes.’

‘ Then tell your man to be at the front door with the carriage by that time—the horse’s head to the west, so that the carriage will go out by the gate nearest the corner of the street.’

‘ Yes—what then ?’

‘ I shall get into the carriage with your servant. If they are detectives at the corner of the street they will stop the carriage before it has gone a dozen yards. The moment you see them occupied in arresting your servant, you will slip out by the other gate, and jump into the cab I have left there. The driver

has orders to start off at once in the other direction, and as soon as he finds he is out of danger, he will ask you where he is to drive to. You will tell him to take you to Radford's, in Finsbury, where your friend is waiting in dreadful suspense for you.'

'Not I,' said Mrs. Redmond emphatically. 'I'm not going to Radford's. I shall make for Victoria, and take the first train that leaves there. I'll wire Nessa where she can find me.'

Eric concealed his disgust under a stiff inclination of the head. Perhaps he did not wholly dislike a decision which gave him an opportunity of befriending Nessa further.

The carriage drove up to the door as Mrs. Redmond and the housemaid were coming downstairs — the latter thickly veiled and wearing a sealskin mantle and muff, which her mistress had taken the precaution to pad to her own proportions. She was skilled in this

sort of work, and had even added to the disguise a knot of false hair, which shone out below the black veil on the back of the girl's head.

'Where is the valise with Miss Grahame's dress?' Eric asked.

'Oh, I've forgotten all about that. There's no time to get it now.'

'But I will not go without it,' said Eric.

With a stamp of her foot and a coarse word, Mrs. Redmond turned and ran upstairs. When she came down with the portmanteau Eric opened it. He was not careless about the least thing that concerned Nessa.

'I do not see any hat,' he said.

With another curse Mrs. Redmond returned to the room above and brought down a toque and a fur jacket as well, foreseeing that she might be sent up again if she omitted that.

She stood back as Eric opened the door.

A round hat and a pair of eyes were visible over the wall between the two gates. Eric gave his arm to the housemaid and led her down to the carriage, taking the portmanteau in his right hand. Raising his hat, he opened the door, and when the girl was seated, he put the portmanteau at the coachman's feet, saying, in a low voice :

‘ Radford’s riding-school in Finsbury. You shall have a pound if you get there in half an hour.’

He took his seat beside the housemaid.

‘ My girl,’ said he, ‘ I will give you five pounds if you prevent anyone seeing your face for five minutes. A man will try to see your face directly ; do not let him succeed.’

Anxious to secure his sovereign, the coachman swept down the drive and out into the road in fine style. The labourers made a dart at the horse’s head, but the carriage had gone twenty yards before it was brought to a

stand. One of the men stepped up and seated himself beside the driver ; the other came to the side of the carriage.

‘ We don’t want to make it unpleasant, sir,’ said he, ‘ but this lady’s got to go to the police-station with us. You can get out if you like, and I will take your place.’

‘ You will do nothing of the kind. I refuse to let you take this lady anywhere until you show me your authority.’

‘ I can pretty soon do that. I’ve got the warrant in my pocket, and I know Mrs. Merrivale there better than she knows me.’

‘ Charlie,’ said the man on the box in a sharp tone of alarm as he turned round, ‘ there’s a female hooking it in that cab. Have you got the right one there ?’

Charlie glanced at the cab, and then plucked at the housemaid’s veil ; but she was prepared for this, and met the attack so well that two valuable minutes were lost before

her veil was removed, and then only with her bonnet and the knot of false hair.

‘They’ve done us !’ he cried, aghast.

‘I thought as much,’ said his mate, jumping down from the box. ‘The right un’s in that cab, and it’s all up if we can’t catch it.’

With that they bolted off after the rapidly vanishing hansom ; while the driver of the victoria, still thinking of the pound to be won, rattled off in the opposite direction.

In Moorgate Street, Eric stopped the carriage, paid the servants, and taking the portmanteau, told the driver to return to St. John’s Wood. In the waiting-room of the riding-school he found Nessa.

‘Where is my friend?’ she asked anxiously, seeing him alone.

‘She has escaped ; but she thought it better not to come here,’ Eric replied, with a delicate consideration for the girl’s feeling towards Mrs. Redmond which led him to conceal the

woman's selfish motive. 'She will telegraph to you here when she has found a secure place where you may join her.'

'She feared they might follow her here and find me. For if anyone is guilty it must be I, who incurred all those dreadful debts, you know.'

She spoke in a tone of earnest persuasion, wishing to disabuse this new friend's mind of the prejudice which he and his family entertained against Mrs. Redmond.

'I hope that no one is more guilty than you,' Eric replied fervently. 'Yes; I wish that with my heart, for your sake. There is a dress in this valise for you; you may have to make a journey, and it would be impossible in that riding-habit.'

'Oh, how thoughtful of her!' exclaimed Nessa; 'anyone but a true friend would have been concerned only about her own safety at such a time.'

‘A true friend cannot ever forget,’ he said, with a touch of sadness, not attempting to disabuse her mind and show that it was he, and not Mrs. Redmond, who had thought of these details.

Nessa called an attendant to take the portmanteau into the ladies’ dressing-room; and then, turning to Eric, she said:

‘I want to thank you for all you have done, but I can find no words that are half nice enough just now. Perhaps I may while I am dressing,’ she added with a faint smile; ‘will you wait here till I come back?’

‘I shall not go away until I must go.’

When she was gone from the room, Eric sat with his face buried in his hands, seeing her face as one sees with closed eyes the light that has fixed itself upon the retina.

A clerk came in and apologized.

‘I beg your pardon, sir—I thought Miss Grahame was here,’ he said.

He had a paper in his hand. Eric rose—  
' You have a telegram for Miss Grahame,'  
he said.

' No ; the wire is addressed to us, but—'  
he hesitated a moment, ' perhaps you can tell  
us something about it.'

He gave the telegram to Eric to read.

' A gentleman will come to you with the  
victoria and cob. Do not let the carriage  
go. I will wire further instructions.'

The office from which the telegram came  
was Victoria ; there was not a word about  
Nessa. Eric's heart bounded with a secret  
hope.

' The ostler says he saw you get out of  
the victoria at the corner of the street,' said  
the clerk.

' Yes ; it has gone back to St. John's  
Wood.'

The clerk took back the telegram with a shrug, and thanked Eric.

‘There is no telegram for Miss Grahame?’

‘None, sir. If any should come I will bring it in at once.’

Nessa came down, charming in her furs.

‘No message has come for me yet?’ she said interrogatively.

‘None.’

‘It is stupid to expect one until she has an address to send me. I may have to wait three or four hours.’ She paused, and then added, her pretty eyes twinkling, ‘I am afraid I cannot yet thank you as I should.’

‘When you find words to thank me I may find words to bid you farewell—not before.’

That is just what she wanted him to say, and he said it as nicely as she could wish.

‘We will leave both till the last moment

possible. I shall be glad to put it off for quite a long while, for there are many questions that I wish to ask you, and—and I usually have lunch about this time.'

Eric carried her off to an hotel, and they ate and drank together, and were happy, though each had black care close at hand. Nessa wished to make herself agreeable, as the only way in which she could express her gratitude, while Eric abandoned himself to the delight of the moment, and put away all gloomy thoughts for the gloomy hour that must come with a practical philosophy only possible to the young.

An elderly stockbroker with a gouty toe looked at them and said to himself :

‘They don’t know yet what trouble is.’

But there was another factor in Eric’s happiness beyond Nessa’s eyes and Nessa’s voice and the charms that made up her delightful personality. Radford’s clerk, in

recommending the hotel at which they dined, had promised that if any telegram for Nessa came in during their absence, he would send it on at once. Nearly two hours had passed since they left the riding-school, and no messenger had come.

Every minute added to the probability that Nessa would be compelled to accept his father's offer.

## CHAPTER XV.

‘ I WONDER if I am behaving quite decorously,’ said Nessa, suddenly seized with a misgiving.

‘ I don’t think I am, somehow, by the way people look at me. You must not think ill of me if I’m not so nice as your sister ; for, you see, I have only left school about two months, and I have never dined with anybody but a lady before.’

‘ How do you know my sister is nice ?’ Eric asked.

She could not tell him that she figured his sister with his simple, honest face and delicate kindness ; but her eyes betrayed the thought, as she answered with some embarrassment :

‘ Oh, I know she is sweet and amiable.

You told me something about her, and I have guessed the rest. Tell me more—about her, and your father, and your home.'

Eric told of them, and their quiet lives and wholesome surroundings, with loving warmth and unpretentious pride ; and Nessa, listening, caught something of his glowing enthusiasm.

' Yes ; I see it all,' she said ; ' that quiet life—sweet and tender and pure.'

Then she rested her cheek on her hand with a sigh, and sat silent, with sadness in her young face.

Despite her ignorance of the world, and her confiding innocence, her mind was not at ease when she thought of Mrs. Redmond and the course they were taking. She could not see in what way she was to blame, and yet she was oppressed with a feeling of responsibility, which had never before troubled her spirit with a serious reflection.

Looking onward, it seemed to her that the past was already overcast with the shadow of wrong-doing.

Eric looked at his watch.

‘What time is it?’ she asked.

‘It is past three.’

‘And no telegram has come yet! Do you think there can be any mistake?’

‘Mrs. Redmond may have forgotten that I said you were going to the riding-school.’

‘You said that a true friend cannot forget.’

‘Perhaps Mrs. Redmond is not a true friend.’

‘If no message should come for me, what shall I do?’ she asked, in dismay.

‘Tell me,’ he said eagerly, ‘that then you will accept my father’s offer, and make a friend of my sister in the place of the one who forgets you.’

‘ It is too soon yet to say that she forgets me.’

‘ Yes ; we will not be unjust. The train does not leave Liverpool Street until eight o’clock. I promised my father to meet him there. We will wait till the last moment for a telegram. Your friend will know that you cannot stay at the riding-school after a certain hour. Do not think you will be under obligation to us. My father is a man of business. He will consult the best lawyers, and see that you get your inheritance, and you will pay him in money for all you have received, and be quite independent. No one will have any claim on you—not anyone,’ he said impressively ; and then, to make his meaning clear, he continued, dropping his voice, and speaking with some difficulty : ‘ I must say something more, that you may have no cause to hesitate about going with my father and sister. I

shall stay in London, and you will not see me for three years.'

Had Nessa been a shallow girl or a worldly girl, she would have replied with a more or less graceful compliment, and have got out of an embarrassing position cheaply ; but she felt deeply, and was too sincere, too simple, for that.

She sat silent, looking in his face with wondering eyes, while the warm blood mantled in her cheek, as she put her position before herself in plain words to fully comprehend his meaning.

'He loves me,' she said to herself, 'more than his father and sister and home. He will banish himself from all he loves that I may not feel his claim upon my affection.'

'Think,' he urged ; 'it is your life that is at stake.'

'Yes ; but that is not all,' she answered.

'Oh, this question is too grave to answer

lightly or hastily. I want to be alone and think it over.'

There was a ladies' reading-room at the end of the dining-hall. He rose, and giving her his arm, led her there.

'I shall go to Finsbury and see if anything has come. I will wait there until seven o'clock. If nothing has come then, may I hope?'

She did not answer, but an involuntary pressure of her hand upon his arm told him that his wish was hers. Impatient with herself, ashamed of her silence, she stopped at the door and gave him her hand.

'You make me feel so poor,' she said ; 'I have nothing to give in return for your kindness—not even a few pretty words.'

'What do I want more than you are telling me now?' he asked, reading her eyes.

Then he turned away, and fled from the

temptation to profit by their tell-tale sweet-  
ness.

In less than an hour he returned with a telegram, looking as if he carried his own death-warrant—as indeed it was for all the dearest hopes of his heart. He gave it to Nessa without a word, and waited. When she had read it, she handed the trembling sheet to him, her bosom swelling with a sigh.

In the interval both had seen that if Mrs. Redmond were faithful she must not be forsaken.

Eric read :

‘Take the next train to Brighton. You will find me in the waiting-room. Can do nothing till you come.’

‘I will take you to the station,’ he said, with forced calm, as he returned the telegram; ‘the cab is at the door waiting.’

He stepped into the hansom after her. Never had moments fled so swiftly or been so precious to them ; yet all were wasted. They scarcely spoke a word during the journey to Victoria.

He got her ticket and put her in a compartment.

‘ The time has nearly come to thank you,’ she said, forcing a smile, when the collector had examined her ticket and closed the door.

‘ Not yet ; not yet,’ he murmured, glancing at the clock in quick dread.

‘ We are sure to see each other again,’ she said.

He shook his head, but his quivering lips refused to speak.

‘ But, if you are not going home for three years, it is quite possible——’

‘ No, no—I shall never see you again,’ he said, in a broken voice.

‘ Oh !’

And then, dashing away the tears that had sprung in her eyes, she said :

‘ But I don’t understand—you must tell me. We cannot part like this.’

‘ I promised my father—before he would tell me your name, and where I might find you—that I would go back with him if you did not.’

In this way he represented his promise never to see Nessa again unless she broke for ever with Mrs. Redmond.

‘ Stand back, there !’ cried the guard, and then he blew his whistle.

The time had come for Nessa to thank him, and for him to say ‘ farewell.’ They could not speak, for the tears that choked them ; could not see each other, for the tears that blinded them. But Nessa put out both her hands with a sob, and he kissed them.

The train moved on ; and she saw him standing there desolate and broken-hearted.

And thus ended Nessa's first love-affair.

## CHAPTER XVI.

WHEN the train was out of the station, Nessa, having the carriage to herself, gave way to her feelings and had a good cry, pouring out her heart in tears and sobs and plaintive little moans for Eric and herself. It was his misery that touched her first ; for though her own position and prospects were not less pitiable, they only came in for the fag-end of her sympathy.

It did her good to cry, but she was glad to get it over and be done with it.

‘I shan’t be stupid again,’ she said, putting her handkerchief away with a fluttering sigh. Nevertheless, the handkerchief came out again once or twice as a little after-shower of tears

fell in thinking of her great loss ; for it was an immense loss to one so friendless and homeless and imperilled as she—those warm-hearted, generous friends, who had opened their arms to her and offered her a safe haven of rest and protection. She was ashamed of those tears, and accused herself of ingratitude to Mrs. Redmond in regretting so much these unknown friends ; but she had to put that lady's sacrifices and professions in a dazzling light to blind herself to the fact that her own loyalty had cost her dearly. As to what it might yet cost her, that she dared not think about at all.

When the train stopped at Three Bridges, Nessa drew herself into the further corner of the compartment to escape attention. The door opened and a gentleman got in. She closed her swollen eyes, feeling that they betrayed her, but she unclosed them with a start as something struck her skirt. The

gentleman, standing in the middle of the carriage with his hand on a travelling bag he had just put in the rack, a sheaf of papers in the other hand, and a rug over his arm, had dropped his umbrella. He apologized and picked it up.

‘I am afraid I’ve woke you up from a doze,’ he said.

‘No, I was not asleep,’ replied Nessa.

‘Sleep! I would defy anyone to do that in these carriages—at this hour of the day, and at your time of life! May I offer you a paper to read?’

Nessa took one gratefully and drew a little nearer to the lamp.

The gentleman was elderly, and spoke with the fatherly manner of a parson or a doctor. He looked like a country doctor, with his clean-shaven face, white tie, close-buttoned frockcoat, and dark gloves. When he had disposed of his luggage satisfactorily, he put

a pair of gold-rimmed glasses on his high-bridged nose, and opened a newspaper. After reading for a couple of minutes, he glanced up at the lamp and changed his position. He read again for two minutes ; then shifted, with another glance of vexation at the flickering light ; finally, after a last attempt to read, he laid the paper down, and took off his glasses with a sigh.

‘Reading is an utter impossibility in these carriages—at any rate, with old eyes,’ he said, smiling at Nessa as she laid down her paper. ‘Happily, for you the journey to Brighton is not a very long one. I presume you are going to Brighton ?’

Nessa admitted that she was going to Brighton.

‘Not much of a place—Brighton,’ the old gentleman continued. ‘No ships on the sea ; no trees on the land ; nothing but shops and men and women—men and women. Well,

after all, perhaps men and women are more interesting to a young lady than ships and trees—especially if that human society includes dear friends.'

The look on Nessa's face as she assented to the proposition would have told a less astute observer than this old gentleman that she had no friends there whom she was eager to join.

'And even without ships the sea is interesting: don't you think so?' asked the gentleman.

Nessa was compelled to acknowledge that she had never yet seen the sea.

'You surprise me. In my young days—forty years ago—it was no uncommon thing for young ladies living in the country to stay at home; but nowadays, with the great facility for travelling, it is quite phenomenal to find one who has never seen the sea—I mean one of that rank that can afford to travel first

class. I am almost tempted to ask you why you have never seen the sea ?'

Little as Nessa knew of men and manners, it seemed to her that this acquaintance was pushing inquiry to the borders of impertinence ; but she accounted for it on the supposition that he must be a doctor, and for that reason accustomed to asking all sorts of strange questions ; so she answered him without any resentment that she had lived all her life in a school ; and with that took up a newspaper and opened it, with the hope that this perfect stranger would not try to pump her any more.

He took the hint, having, perhaps, learnt as much as he wished to know for the present, and, dropping the subject, tried again to get through the leader.

‘ Ah, here we are at last ! ’ he said cheerfully, when the train slackened speed. ‘ You will allow me to get your baggage out of the

van, I hope ?' he added, as he handed his bag and rug to the porter who came to the door.

'Thank you very much ; I have no luggage,' said Nessa.

'Well, that's a good job. May I call you a four-wheeler or a hansom ?'

'I have no need of a cab, thank you.'

'But, my dear young lady, you cannot find your way in an unknown town alone.'

'I expect someone to meet me here.'

'Oh, that is better. Then now I have only to wish you "good-evening."'

He bustled off with the porter, and Nessa saw no more of him until she came out of the waiting-room with Mrs. Redmond, whom she found there. There was no one on the platform now except the old gentleman and three porters, who were looking carefully about upon the floor.

'Lost my glasses,' he explained, recognising Nessa as he looked up. 'Had them in the

carriage, you remember. Cord broken ; somebody in the crowd must have filched them as I came up the platform. Such a lot of bad characters about here always,' he added, addressing himself to Mrs. Redmond.

Mrs. Redmond inclined her head stiffly, her short nose lifted, her long lip drawn down, and hurried Nessa off. As they were getting into a fly, the old gentleman bustled out of the station, with the porter grinning at his heels. He caught sight again of Nessa, and came to the door.

'Found them in my pocket,' he said, with a beaming smile. 'Very stupid of me. Good-evening. I hope to meet you again.'

He took off his hat and withdrew from the door. As the fly moved off he glanced at the back, and, turning up his sleeve, jotted down the number on his shirt-cuff.

Mrs. Redmond had told the flyman to drive to the Parade ; but remembering on the way

that she wanted some frilling, she stopped at a draper's, and Henson's Hotel being but a stone's-throw distant, she paid the man and dismissed him.

Nessa was surprised to find that they were to stay at a big hotel ; and when the lift had taken them up to their rooms, she was still more astonished to see a silver-mounted dressing-case on the table, a couple of travelling boxes, and a variety of knick-knacks and articles of clothing about the room that she had never seen before.

‘Is this your room ?’ she asked.

‘Yes. Yours is in there. The sitting-room is on the other side. Nice, aren’t they ? You’ll find a Gladstone with a few necessary things in it ; the rest you can get next week as you want them. What do you think of my dressing-case ?’

‘It’s very pretty ; but how did you get it ?’

‘Paid for it, chummie,’ replied Mrs. Red-

mond, dropping her voice. ‘And a nice lot these things have cost ; but they wouldn’t take us in anywhere without luggage, and I came away from St. John’s Wood with nothing.’

This was hardly true, for, despite the haste of her departure, she had contrived to stow away under her waterproof a great many unpaid-for articles of value which she had since disposed of to a private dealer in such things, whose advertisement she found in a local paper.

‘By-the-bye,’ she added, before Nessa could ask where she got the money to make her purchases, ‘you must pick the name out of your linen to-night before the chambermaids get a chance of prying into it. What are you going to call yourself ? I’ve given my name as Mrs. Gaston Lascelles.’

Nessa looked at her friend in uneasy silence. It had seemed to be natural and justifiable

that Mrs. Redmond in leaving her husband should discard the name he had given her and resume her maiden name ; but this second change, and the change proposed for herself, frightened her.

‘ Must we go under false names ? ’

‘ To be sure we must, unless you want the police to be down on us, as they certainly would if they found our names in the visitors’ list. And where’s the harm ? ’

‘ I don’t know ; only it seems as if we were doing something wrong.’

‘ Oh, fudge ! ’ exclaimed Mrs. Redmond impatiently. ‘ Lots of people change their names for no reason at all. The swells do it ; so do actors and authors. If any justification is needed, necessity should be an excuse. We don’t want to do it ; it’s forced upon us by that villain Nichols, who swindled us, and that other villain, my husband, who wants to get hold of you. Have we

ever done anything wrong — either of us ?

‘We thought we could pay, to be sure,’ said Nessa reflectively, ‘and we meant to pay, and we should have paid, if that man had kept his promise. No ; I do not think we have done anything wilfully dishonest.’

‘Very well, then, that settles it. Look here, Nessa : you’ll have to get all this silly squeamish nonsense out of your head. We’ve got to live ; and we can’t live by telling everybody we’re a couple of ill-used women, with not a penny in the world. We might get pity, but we shouldn’t get anything else. People don’t like whining women, and steer clear of them as much as they can. We must put a bold face on it, if it’s only to save your life. Everyone likes a plucky little woman, and we shall get on well enough if we play our cards properly. Why, look here : we started with nothing, and we’ve wriggled on pretty

comfortably for three months ; and there's no earthly reason why we shouldn't wriggle on comfortably for three years.'

' But we thought we should get money on my expectations——'

' And so we shall. There are hundreds of money-lenders who'd be glad to do it ; and they're not all blackguards like Nichols. Oh, for Heaven's sake !' she added petulantly, ' don't pull such a long face. One would think you had all the hardships to bear. Look at me : I've given up my home—every blessed thing I had in the world. What have you lost ? Not a farthing. You're better dressed, and you're better off every way than when you ran away from school. Look at me ! I don't look as if I were going to be hanged. Now look in that glass, and tell me what sort of a nice, cheerful companion in misfortune you see there. I call it ungrateful—that I do.'

‘Oh, forgive me, dear,’ said Nessa; ‘indeed, I am not ungrateful at heart. I know how much you have done for me. I mean to be bright and cheerful, and do my share in bearing the burden. But think, dear, that I am very young and unused to the world, and not able just yet to bear up as bravely as you.’

Mrs. Redmond was mollified by Nessa’s humility and the compliment to her own strength, and forgave her with a kiss.

‘All right, chummie; we shall pull through if you make up your mind to it. Now, what name will you take?’

‘Any that you think will do,’ said Nessa, with a sigh of resignation.

‘What do you say to Gladys de Vere?’

‘Do you think it sounds quite like me?’ Nessa asked, in a tone of doubt, for the name reminded her painfully of certain cheap novellettes the girls used to smuggle into school and devour in secret.

‘Perhaps not ; I thought of it for myself. Viola is pretty and uncommon.’

Nessa assented timidly. It was a very pretty name, she said.

‘Very well, then, Viola it shall be. Viola D’ something ; it must be D’, with an apostrophe. D’Anvers -- that will do : Viola D’Anvers. Now come down, and let us get some dinner. I shan’t be right till I’ve had some sparkling.’

In the dining-room Nessa felt the hot blood mount to the roots of her hair when her friend, with the loud tone and peculiar pronunciation affected by persons who wish to be thought better bred and better educated than they are, said : ‘We will sit heah, Viola,’ and told the waiter to see if there were any ‘lettahs for Miss D’Anvers.’ It seemed to her that the gentleinen looking at her from the adjacent table must see that she had not a name like that.

In the drawing-room after dinner Mrs. Redmond seated herself carelessly before the open piano, and showed off her musical attainments in a piece of such painful brilliancy that the elderly gentlemen, after withdrawing to the remotest corners of the room, dropped out one after the other to seek repose in the smoking-room, or elsewhere.

A couple of children were seated at a table with a book before them, looking unnaturally serious, as children do look in an hotel. Nessa caught sight of them at once, and was seized with a yearning to make those grave little faces gay. She had lived all her life among children, and herself, in many inclinations, was still a child at heart. She would have liked a good romp, for instance, or a game in which she could laugh without any feeling of restraint at harmless fun and innocent nonsense. In the new life she felt the loss of such outlets to natural mirth; the fun

of the theatres did not seem to her quite innocent, and the nonsense of society, as she saw it, was certainly not laughable. And now that the conditions of her existence were becoming more and more artificial, the desire for simplicity increased.

She drew up a chair and seated herself between the two children, who welcomed her at once, she being one of those who win love at first sight ; and in a few minutes the little group was radiant with happiness. The book given to the children to amuse themselves with was nothing but an illustrated guide to all the advertising hotels in the world ; yet out of this dull material she got an endless amount of fun and sentiment, working into her description of the bald engravings so many quaint conceits and pretty fancies that each in turn became as fascinating as a fresh chapter in a fairy story.

‘ What a charming picture ! ’ said someone

on the other side of the room, struck by the sweetness and vivacity in Nessa's face.

'People always say that of my little ones,' replied the mother, to whom the observation was addressed, as she glanced complacently at the group. 'Ah, they have someone with them—a young lady, pretty, and, I should say, distinguished by her manner. Who is she, do you know?'

'Not at all. A fresh visitor. She came, I believe, with the lady at the piano.'

'That creature!' gasped the matron in alarm, and then, raising her voice, 'Children, come and say good-night now.'

The children clung to Nessa. She rose and took them across the room, giving them up to their mother with a few graceful words which were received in cold silence and replied to by an offensively distant bow.

The sensitive girl smarted under this obviously intentional 'affront as though she

had been struck with a whip. The smile and the colour went out of her face ; she drew herself up ; her features grew rigid ; and lip and eye answered scorn for scorn as she turned away. But up in her room she threw herself on her pillow and burst into tears, asking herself what she had done that she should be deemed no longer fit to speak to little children.

At another time her pride might have borne her tearless through this trial ; but the events of the day and a dull misgiving as to the blamlessness of her own conduct had unstrung her.

She was herself again, however, the next morning, when she stood on the Parade looking in wonder for the first time on the sea. The aspect of the sparkling waters, the pungent smell of the fresh breeze, the sound of the long, curling waves as they burst on the shingle, imparted their vivacity and vigour

to her spirits, and she felt brave enough to face whatever enemy might come. She went on to the pier and stayed there, watching the water seethe amongst the columns and girders, till hunger drove her back to the hotel.

Mrs. Redmond was also in high spirits, although she had not been down to the sea. She had made the acquaintance of two or three gentlemen the preceding evening—one a delightful military man—and was resolved to take apartments for the season in Brighton. In the course of the morning they found a suite of rooms on the Parade to be let at the absurdly low price of ten guineas a week.

‘Do you think they will do, dear?’ Mrs. Redmond asked.

Nessa thought that nothing in the world could be pleasanter than to live where one could always see the sea and watch the streams of carriages and people on the Parade.

‘Very well, then ; it is understood,’ said Mrs. Redmond to the highly respectable widow who let the apartments ; ‘we take these rooms for the season at ten guineas a week. If we do not come in to-night, we shall come in on Monday. And now, Viola dear, we will go and lunch at Mutton’s.’

The ladies did not come in that night, nor did they make their appearance on Monday morning, and for this simple reason : on Monday morning they were seeking apartments in Spital Square, London.

END OF VOL. I.









